



Am I thinking in all-or-none terms?  
Am I jumping to conclusions?  
Am I blaming myself for something  
that's not really my fault? Am I  
doing something personally that  
has nothing to do with me? Am I  
expecting myself to be perfect? Am I  
paying attention to only the black  
and white, or am I staying open  
to the possibilities and possibilities  
that are out there?

# Change your self-talk

*In every moment of every day of your life, your thoughts are determining how you feel and behave. Given they have such enormous power over your life, you'd better make sure your thoughts are facts because, more often than you realise, they are not.*

Words SONIA ZADRO

*"If a person gave away your body to some passerby, you'd be furious. Yet you hand over your mind to anyone who comes along so they may abuse you, leaving it disturbed and troubled. Have you no shame in that?" ~ Epictetus*

**W**hat essentially makes you depressed or anxious or angry? Most would say it's what happens to you that determines how you feel. You were retrenched from work today and are devastated. You were abused by a friend and feel angry and sad. You were ignored by your partner and feel rejected.

Many people, however, including psychologists, now recognise life events play only a small role in how you feel and behave. The real culprits are your thoughts. It's not what happens to you but how you interpret and think about what happens to you that matters.

Many of our interpretations of events are distorted and this is where cognitive therapy comes in. Cognitive therapy is not about positive thinking. It's about rational thinking. It's about learning to identify our interpretations of events, otherwise known as our self-talk, and then learning to challenge the self-talk by examining the cold hard evidence. In effect, we are using our rational brain as a weapon to fight the distortions we are prone to in our everyday thinking.

The idea that our thoughts influence our feelings and behaviour is not a new one. The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus, born 55 CE, once famously said, "Men are disturbed not by things but by the view which they take of them." Twenty centuries later, American psychiatrist Aaron Beck founded the most highly researched and applied therapy of recent times based on this idea. Beck called it cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), cognitive being another term relating to thoughts.

Before developing CBT, Beck worked for many years with depressed patients in the 1950s until he came to wonder if there was more he could do to help his patients. He suspected they weren't revealing certain thoughts they were only dimly aware of because they weren't taught to focus on them. So he began to check in on these momentary thoughts.

For instance, one anxious female patient was openly discussing her sexual conflicts, yet over a long period he made no progress. One day, Beck asked her how she was feeling about what she'd been discussing. She responded, "He is bored with me ... This sounds foolish ... He'll probably try and get rid of me."

Beck realised her anxiety was not from her sexual conflicts but from her self-criticism and fear of being judged. He called these thoughts "self-talk" and said they are often not fully conscious but just below the surface and we have to train ourselves to focus on them.

## Identifying your self-talk

Sometimes self-talk is obvious. For instance, you lock your keys in your

car for the third time in a week and think, "I'm an idiot. I never remember anything!" Often, however, self-talk isn't so obvious. We simply just feel emotionally triggered and ask ourselves, "What am I thinking right now?" — then write out a stream of consciousness.

For example, say a friend at work doesn't say hello and seems to ignore you. You spend the day feeling flat and worried but can't pinpoint why so you write out your stream of consciousness:

"Fran ignored me and is angry with me because I didn't make lunch last Friday." This is your self-talk.

Then you ask the following: Is this a fact or belief? Did Fran directly tell you she was annoyed with you? If the answer is no, then your self-talk is a belief, not a fact, so don't treat it like a fact.

This is often the case. Even though self-talk might "feel" like a fact, it doesn't mean it is. What's the evidence to support this self-talk?

This is rational thinking, not positive thinking. So honestly explore whether there is there any evidence to support the idea that Fran is annoyed with you. The answer might be yes — Francis sometimes calls on the weekend and she didn't last weekend.

Is there any evidence to support the idea Fran is not annoyed with you? Yes, she sent two work-related emails that seemed friendly. She also seems a bit withdrawn from everyone today and may be preoccupied.

Is there another possible way to view this situation? It's possible Fran simply didn't see me this morning. She might be distracted by a problem with her husband or kids or work, or feel unwell, or be in a bad mood for a hundred other reasons.

After examining the evidence, do I feel any different? Usually you feel a little better having looked at the situation more objectively.

## Helpful questions to challenge negative self-talk

- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- Am I thinking in all-or-none terms?
- Am I blaming myself for something that's not really my fault?
- Am I taking something personally that actually has little or nothing to do with me?
- Am I expecting myself to be perfect?
- Am I paying attention to only the black side of things?
- Am I over-estimating the chances of disaster or exaggerating the importance of events?
- Do these thoughts help or hinder me?



## Underlying beliefs

Self-talk can also direct you to the underlying negative belief being triggered in a situation. Take the same situation with Fran not acknowledging you at work, only this time you identify different self-talk.

"Fran didn't acknowledge me because my friendship doesn't matter to her." Here you could use this self-talk to discover underlying negative beliefs you hold about yourself. To do this you would ask the following:

Start by assuming your self-talk is correct (which it likely isn't) and ask, "If this idea is true, what do I think this says about me?" Your answer might be, "It means I don't matter."

Next assume this is correct and ask, "If I don't matter, what does that say about me?" You might think, "It means I'm insignificant, unworthy of others' love. I'm unlovable." Hence we've identified several negative core beliefs.

Asking these questions about our self-talk can direct us to the deeper beliefs we have about ourselves, which likely influence many of our interpretations at an unconscious level. We can then remind ourselves that our original self-talk is coming from an old distorted belief we have about ourselves and is likely not factual. We then could explore other therapies that can help shift these core beliefs, such as schema-focused therapy or EMDR.

Challenging your self-talk may seem time-consuming, but when you take the time to do it you gain tremendous insight into yourself and can become your own therapist. You will likely recognise patterns in your thinking. You may notice, for instance, that you tend to take things personally a lot. Or that you tend to imagine the worst possible outcomes for situations. Or that you tend to make assumptions about what others are thinking all the time.

Beck identified many common unhelpful thinking patterns. It's likely that all of us relate to some of these patterns at one time or another. Here are a few.

## Unhelpful thinking styles

### Black-and-white/all-or-none thinking

This is when you see things in black and white — as one extreme or the other. Some examples are:

"If I don't get really high marks in my exams I'm a complete and utter worthless failure!"

*Learning to examine your thoughts does not discount the tremendous trauma or difficulties people can experience, and such trauma often requires deeper processing than cognitive therapy. However, no matter what you encounter, there is one thing no one can take from you: your thoughts.*

*It was Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, survivor of the World War Two concentration camps, who said, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."*

Try replacing this with "If I don't get high marks I'll be disappointed but I know I'm still smart, capable and worthy. I just need to look at what to do differently next time."

"If I do something that goes against my values — for example, be dishonest — then I'm a shameful, unforgivable person." Replace this with "I'll be disappointed in myself but I'm human, still worthy, and I can use this mistake as feedback to behave differently in future."

Black-and-white thinking comes when you get really attached to a standard you have for yourself. This causes tremendous pressure on you and feeds your anxiety. If you have black-and-white thinking, sooner or later, realistically, you're not going to meet your rigid high standards. Where does that lead? To depression. So this thinking also feeds depression.

If you hear yourself using a lot of "I should ...!" or "I must ...!" in your self-talk, it's likely you are putting too much pressure on yourself and have black-and-white thinking. You can also be black and white about day-to-day activities like getting the house cleaned by noon or building a new cupboard perfectly.

### Catastrophising

This involves thinking the worst possible outcome for a situation and is the hallmark of anxiety. Let's say you are fearful about public speaking and have to present a speech at a wedding. Your self-talk might go like this: "I'll forget what to say, then say it all wrong. No one will laugh at my jokes. I'll appear ridiculous, incompetent and be so humiliated the entire night will be ruined and the bride and groom will hate me for ruining their wedding, no one will talk to me ever again and I'll never want to show my face in public again!"

If you catch yourself thinking this way, remind yourself you are catastrophising! In reality your speech may not be perfect but the earth won't open up and swallow you if you make mistakes. Most people are too focused on their own issues to care that much about your performance.

### Mind reading

Here you assume you know what people are thinking without clarifying it with them. A friend might not return your call so you tell yourself, "He probably doesn't like me any more." Or your boss gives you some feedback to improve your work output and you think, "She thinks I'm completely hopeless and I'm not good enough for this role."

Mind reading is commonly in the form of taking things personally. Remind yourself these are beliefs, not facts. Examine the evidence and explore whether this thinking relates to a deeper core belief about yourself.

### Filtering

When you filter, you pick out one negative detail and forget all the good stuff. Say you attend a party and have some laughs, great food, fun dancing, but make a thoughtless remark to an acquaintance and embarrass yourself. On returning home a friend asks how the party went and you say it was a complete disaster because you embarrassed yourself. You forget all the good parts of the night and focus on the one thing that didn't go well.

### Over-generalising

This is when you have one failure or bad experience and assume it means you will always fail or have a bad experience. You might fail your driving test and think, "I'll never get my licence! I'm always going to fail!" Or a partner ends your relationship and you think, "I'll never have a successful relationship. Everyone will always leave me!"

The fact is you failed one driving test and had one failed relationship, no more and no less. You simply can't predict your future based on this. If you explore what you might do differently next time, you'll have a better chance of success.

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