



Balancing Stress for Healthy Living

*Self-Talk and
Building Resilience*

Self-talk and building resilience

Understanding stress ... it bears repeating that stress can be a difficult concept to grasp. You are aware of it when you feel it, yet it's hard to explain those feelings to others.

Fortunately, *managing* your stress is more straightforward. Once you learn some basic concepts, you can begin feeling better right away. Stress management is a combination of changing things about yourself and changing things in your environment. Changing your environment is probably the more important of the two strategies, but it usually takes a little more time. To begin right away, it's best to start making changes *from within* and then work on your environment.

The concept of resilience

Have you ever wondered why the same stressors bother some people more than others? Or why some people just seem to deal with change more easily? There are big differences in how people think about and ultimately deal with life's challenges. This involves the concept of *resilience*, which is also called hardiness.

Resilience is the process of “bouncing back” from the stress in your life (e.g., a traumatic event, bad week at work, conflict with others). Although everyone is resilient, the degree of resilience varies from person to person. Learning to deal with stress effectively involves learning to strengthen and draw upon your own resiliency.



Resilient people tend to feel more satisfied with their lives because they are in a position to withstand the inevitable daily hassles and major events that we all experience.

The most resilient people share these common characteristics:

- 1** They accept that stress is a normal part of life that actually helps them learn something, thereby making them stronger long-term.
- 2** They believe they can influence some of the things that make their life stressful, and in turn, minimize their stress.
- 3** They are committed to taking action to help them feel better.

Those who share these characteristics tend to feel more satisfied with their lives because they are in a position to withstand the inevitable daily hassles and major events that we all experience. Optimizing these characteristics when you need them most is a good place to start. Read on to learn how to do just that.

Self-talk: Saying is believing

Self-talk is something everyone does. It's an ongoing conversation — a mental dialogue — we have with ourselves that helps us determine how we feel and what we do about the situations we encounter. Usually, it's so automatic and so subtle that we don't notice it *or* the effect it has. Yet if we hear a message often enough, we start to believe it.

Awareness is key, so it's important to understand that when we receive positive messages from ourselves or others, we're more likely to develop a positive self-image. On the other hand, if the messages we receive are typically negative, then a negative self-image is more likely to emerge.



The power of positive self-talk

Positive self-talk helps you stay focused on your success and the good things in your life. Even if it doesn't seem natural at first, positive messages are powerful allies in your efforts to live a life with less stress.

Positive self-talk:

- Fuels motivation
- Empowers you to believe in yourself
- Encourages you to take action
- Leads to positive changes

As we know, not all self-talk is positive. Sometimes the message you hear is negative, making you feel more stressed. The trick to managing negative self-talk is to first recognize it.

“

Every thought is a seed.
If you plant crab apples,
don't count on harvesting
Golden Delicious.

— Bill Meyer

”

Negative self-talk:

Do you recognize it?

Negative self-talk is part of a defense mechanism you develop to protect yourself. It usually involves dwelling on problems that don't have clear solutions or exaggerating the negative aspects of a situation (while denying the positive side).

If left unchecked, negative self-talk can leave you feeling overwhelmed and perhaps helpless in your ability to change things. Take a look at some examples of negative self-talk below.



Type	Definition	Example
All-or-none	Everything is black or white. If it is not perfect, it is not acceptable.	<i>"I did not meet that deadline. They must think I'm completely incompetent."</i>
Overgeneralization	One bad event means everything is bad forever.	<i>"She really treated me poorly yesterday. I will never be able to make her happy."</i>
Disqualifying/ minimizing the positive	Good or bad, only focus on the negative parts of an event.	<i>"I guess we are talking now, but I'm sure it won't last long."</i>
Jumping to conclusions	Assuming negative future consequences without the support of facts.	<i>"All of my friends will think I'm losing it if they know how I feel."</i>
Mislabeled	Putting negative labels on yourself, which influences future events.	<i>"I'm a failure. This program will never work for someone like me — I'm dropping out."</i>
Personalization	Assuming all responsibility for a negative event, even if you are not responsible.	<i>"I'm feeling so sick, but I can't believe I missed work."</i>

Learn to build and strengthen your resilience

LISTEN to your self-talk ... and choose what to tell yourself

Unfortunately, we can fall into negative habits in our thinking, just as we do in our behavior. *What are you telling yourself?* If it's negative, edit it — rewrite it!

One strategy for changing self-talk is to imagine the message is coming from a radio or CD. Imagine listening to music you don't like. What would you do? You would probably change the station or take the CD out and replace it with something you enjoy — music that makes you feel good.

This is the same concept with swapping out your self-talk. If you recognize that it's not encouraging you to take action or make change — then change it. Replace it with something that is motivating and empowering. We actually edit our self-talk all the time, however, we do so without even realizing it.

Change your route

Imagine if you changed jobs and had to take a new route to work. We all have the ability to alter our thoughts and what we tell ourselves. If we didn't, we would have to go all the way to our old job first and then try to find our way to the new job from there.

At first, this new self-talk would be quite evident. You might even catch yourself talking through the new directions — take a right here, a left there —



**Is your self-talk negative? Change it —
just like you'd swap out a CD if you
didn't like the music.**

but pretty soon you would begin to develop the new habit. Eventually, you would be able to get to your new job as easily as you got to the old one.

The same holds true when you're working on developing positive self-talk. At first it's quite evident and may even sound a bit unnatural. Yet the more you do it, the more confident you become. Eventually you'll begin to listen to your positive self-talk — and it will become as natural and automatic as your negative self-talk used to be.

3 steps to changing your self-talk

Believe in yourself! Make your inner coach work for you, not against you

Picture two competitors ... just moments before an important race. They anxiously await the starting signal and the ultimate test they're about to endure. The first athlete thinks, "OK, I've worked hard and prepared for this. I'll go through it just as I trained. I know I can do it."

The second athlete thinks, "Everybody's watching me. I'm afraid of failing in front of the crowd. I'll probably blow it." He or she may think the anxious feelings are due to the situation, but it's also the "inner coach" who instills the sense of panic.



So what can you do when your inner coach is making matters worse?

You can ...

1

Identify your negative self-talk.

What is it? When does it occur? The first step is to identify your negative self-talk, especially as it relates to specific situations you find stressful. Remember, self-talk is subtle and automatic, so you may not be aware of it. Focus in on what your negative self-talk or inner thoughts are and the situation(s) in which they occur. Keeping a log of your self-talk may be helpful. Take a look at the example below.

My self-talk log

Date: ___/___/___

What I say to myself:

Before the stressful situation: "I'll never be able to meet this deadline at work. I'll let my coworkers down and certainly won't impress my supervisor. Maybe I should back out now before things become worse."

During the stressful situation: "I can't believe I got myself into this situation. I don't have anyone I can ask for help. I knew I was going to fail."

After the stressful situation: "Well, maybe I didn't fail completely, but things didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped. The project got done in time, but it wasn't my best work."

2

Identify the problems that result from your negative self-talk.

As you track your negative self-talk, try to make the connections between what you think, how it makes you feel, and ultimately, what you do (or don't do) as a result.

When trying to identify your negative self-talk, consider the ABCs of the situation.

Activating events

Activating events are the situations that promote negative self-talk. These are the stressful situations you encounter on a regular basis.

Beliefs

Beliefs are what you tell yourself will happen in those situations, whether they are logical thoughts or not.

Consequences

Consequences are what will actually happen if you continue to think negatively.

In other words, certain situations trigger negative self-talk or beliefs — and this negative thinking leads to unpleasant consequences.

Example:

Frequent disagreements with a coworker may often lead you to think about how much you dislike your job, the people there, and everything about it. This in turn, leads to unhealthy coping behaviors (e.g., overeating, alcohol abuse) or low mood.

In the end, you just basically feel unhappy. Using the ABCs, your dissatisfaction is mediated by negative thinking. But what if you could break this chain of events? What if you could replace your beliefs with something more positive — or at least more realistic?



3

Change your negative self-talk.

The final step is to actually change (or edit) your self-talk — or your “B” (belief) — into something positive. The idea here is that if you can replace your existing negative self-talk with something more realistic or positive, it will break the ABC chain described on the previous page. When the chain is broken, you feel less stressed, more in control of the situation that caused it, and more satisfied with the outcome.

Changing your self-talk basically means redirecting your inner coach to work *for* you instead of against you. The next time you catch yourself using negative self-talk, try some of the following key strategies:

Thought-stopping



- Immediately say to yourself, “STOP!” And do something else (e.g., take a walk, hum a tune, listen to music) to distract yourself from the negative thinking.

Challenge and substitute



Answer these questions:

- What is the evidence for what I am thinking?
- Is there another, more realistic way to think about this?
- What would I say to someone else who was thinking this way?
- What are the implications of all this anyway?

Self-coaching



- When you are in a situation where negative self-talk commonly occurs, pick a positive self-statement and repeat it over and over in your head. For example, you may try repeating the phrase, “I will get through this.”

Change your self-talk ... with practice, practice, practice!

When problems arise in your life, a trusted friend or family member can usually help you gain perspective and make you feel better. You can get similar results by directing what you say to yourself, too. But you have to draw on your inner coach to make it happen.

Remember, it is possible to change your self-talk. The idea is to think more realistically. To be successful at changing your self-talk takes practice,

practice, practice! The more often you change your negative self-talk, the less often it will occur. And eventually, positive self-talk will take its place.

Set aside some time each day (in the morning, in the car, before bed) to practice the three-step process outlined on the previous pages. Especially practice positive self-talk around your friends, family and coworkers. Soon you will notice that it is contagious to others.

Mind your language!

Some self-talk activates emotions more easily than others. In particular, such self-talk includes words that are extreme — such as *never*, *always*, *nobody*, *only* or *nothing*. Words that are judgmental — such as *can't*, *must*, *failure*, *terrible*, *awful* or *wrong* — also activate emotions. These words tend to increase the amount of stress we feel because they ignore the positive, exaggerate the negative, and distort what is really happening.

So, why do we say these words to ourselves? We do so because our brain wants the world to make sense by having all of the information we are processing agree. It's just a natural way of helping to create one simplified, coherent picture of what we dislike about a situation. On the other hand, when we feel calm, it's much easier to sort through the details.

If you find yourself not minding your language, you're probably unable to use your inner coach in a way that is beneficial. Simple changes in your inner dialogue can have a profound influence on the outcome.



How resilient are you?

Remember, you get to choose how you react to situations — and you can influence or control some of the things that cause you stress. Although it may be difficult at times, it's important not to let yourself get stuck! Draw upon your resilience to help you bounce back.

Part of managing your negative self-talk or inner thoughts may sometimes involve just accepting

these thoughts and continuing on with your goals anyway (even if you are feeling down). What's most important is taking note of the benefits that positive self-talk creates for you.

Give yourself credit and reward yourself for making an effort to think positively. The more you do it, the more confident, calm and productive you will become.