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The Things I Say to Myself: The Importance of Self-Talk

By:
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This year has been a particularly stressful year for persons with intellectual disabilities (ID), staff, and their families due to all the uncertainty and restrictions in place because of the Coronavirus – a word that we are now tired of hearing. The within-agency and worldwide changes have challenged us mentally, emotionally, and even physically, forcing us to look within ourselves to find strength.

The process has in no way been easy, and many of us did not know where to start until we found ourselves in a place that we no longer wanted to be. Although we recognized that persons with ID needed more support than usual, it took longer to realize that we also needed more support than usual.

In an effort to provide support through a virtual platform, I started an anti-burnout group with a colleague, which was specifically created to support all staff. Through the process of promoting well-being and self-care to others, I reminded myself of what I could do and say in order to stay motivated.

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It was interesting to realize that most of us are able to list the things we need to do in order to take care of ourselves, such as get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, and meditate; however, few of us think about the things that we say to ourselves, which is of equal if not greater importance. What we say to ourselves guides everything we do and all our interactions. Findings from research in the area of self-talk has provided evidence to support how positive and negative statements can influence levels of anxiety and stress, performance, mood, and self-esteem.



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Negative self-statements such as, “It’s too hard, I can’t do it,” “I’m not smart enough,” and “There’s no point,” are judgmental, self-defeating, and condescending. These statements can be thought of as a form of punishment that we inflict on ourselves, which cause us to feel powerless, discouraged, and inadequate. The more we repeat these statements, the more likely we are to believe them, and the less able we are to cope with challenging and stressful situations.



This often leads to burn-out and feelings of depression, which makes us less willing to engage in (or less likely to care about) activities that could be helpful (e.g., exercising, meditation, etc.). When we feel burnt-out and depressed, we are likely to engage in even more negative self-talk and the cycle continues. It becomes increasingly difficult to support the mental health of others when we are struggling to support the mental health of ourselves. The steps below can be used to reduce negative self-talk.

1) Notice Your Thoughts and Feelings:

Given how busy we generally are, and how many things we constantly juggle, we often end up running on autopilot without being aware of what we tell ourselves. It is difficult to stop doing something when we do not even know that we are doing it. Therefore, it is important to slow down and pay attention to our thoughts and feelings. Often, when we experience negative emotions, such as loneliness, worthlessness, guilt, and shame, we also engage in negative self-talk.

2) Separate Your Inner Critic:

It is important to recognize that we criticize ourselves based on what we have experienced from our interactions with others. Our self-appraisals are often based on the judgments, criticisms, and expectations from others that we have taken on as part of our own inner critic. Our inner critic constantly judges who we are and what we do, but it is not part of our identity. By separating our inner critic from who we are as a person, it becomes clearer to recognize when we are making judgements. It is sometimes helpful to give our inner critic a name, such as Ursula so that, when you begin to criticize yourself, you can recognize that it is Ursula speaking and not you.

3) Talk Back:

When we catch ourselves making negative statements and recognize that we are being self-critical, it is important for us to counteract the negative statement with something more realistic. For example, if I make a mistake and say something like, “I’m so stupid!” I should catch myself and correct the statement. I could say something like, “That’s not true, you are not stupid. You are a smart person who just made a mistake, and that is okay. Everyone makes mistakes.”

In addition to catching, separating, and revising the negative things we say to ourselves, it is important to make a conscious effort to add positive self-talk into our daily routines. One form of positive self-talk is the use of affirmations, which are positive statements that we say to ourselves. Where negative self-statements create barriers and limitations, affirmations allow growth and transformation.

Affirmations have been shown to improve health, education, and relationship outcomes, self-confidence, and resistance to change, with long-lasting benefits that can last from months to years. They are personal in that they reflect our core values and beliefs, and they serve as reminders of our strengths and resources when we are faced with challenges, stresses, and threats. They remind us of the bigger picture and help prevent us from getting stuck and overwhelmed by everyday demands. Moreover, several studies in the area of neuroscience have provided evidence to support the fact that our brains are plastic or changeable. Over time

and with repetition, our thoughts can actually change the way our brains work and even change our genes!

We all want to feel good and think positively of ourselves and using affirmations can help with this. All we need to do is pick a phrase and repeat it. The steps below can be used to help us decide what affirmations would be useful:

- 1) **Identify:** It is important to first identify what we perceive as weaknesses by making a list. The items can then be ranked based on what we identify as being most problematic.
- 2) **Choose/Create:** Affirmations should be chosen/created based on what we have identified that we have to work on. Several examples can be found online and through various resources, or we can choose to create our own such as, “I can do anything I set my mind to” or “I know I will get everything I want.”
- 3) **Positive:** Affirmations should be positive and based on what you want rather than what you do not want. For example, we would say, “I can do anything” rather than “I have a hard time getting things done.”
- 4) **Present-Tense:** Affirmations should always be in present tense rather than future tense. For example, we would say, “I am enough” rather than “I will be enough.”
- 5) **Personal:** Affirmations should be personal, that is, they should relate directly to our own values and beliefs and not be based on what anyone else thinks, does, or expects. We are only in control of our own thoughts and behaviour and that is where our focus needs to be.

Once we have chosen affirmations that are meaningful to us, it is important to practice them regularly. The more we practice, the more they will become ingrained in the way we think about ourselves. It is helpful to schedule time in our calendars or put reminders in our phones so that we remember to practice for three to five minutes every day until it becomes a habit. It is also useful to have visuals of the affirmations posted in places that we see every day (e.g., across from the bed, beside the mirror, in our cars, on our computers, etc.)

It is important to consider timing. Aside from practicing every day, affirmations can be particularly useful when rehearsed before a threatening situation or soon after. For example, they would be useful during times when we feel nervous or scared (e.g., before a presentation/meeting), or after a situation that left us feeling negatively (e.g., after receiving criticism, having an argument, making a mistake, etc.).

In the end, the goal is to replace the negative things we would normally say to ourselves with more positive and helpful statements. It is an important way that we can take care of our mental health and something to which we all need to pay more attention. Below are some affirmations that are meaningful to me, and I hope that you will find or create some that are meaningful to you. ☺

I have unlimited potential

Everything I need comes to me at a perfect time

I am grateful for all that I have

I choose to believe that it is easy to change a thought or a pattern

I always have a choice

Loving myself and thinking joyful, happy thoughts is the quickest way to create a wonderful life

I am safe, and everything is good in my world

About the author

Miranda has been supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities and mental health disorders for over 16 years and has experience working with a wide range of populations. She has a background in behavioural science and psychology and is currently pursuing a Master of Psychology degree. Miranda is part of the clinical department at Vita Community Living Services where she holds the role of a behaviour therapist.

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