



Controlling Our Emotions Through Self Talk

by Michael Hargrove ©

This is just one element of what is commonly referred to as state management skills or managing our emotional state. We manage our emotional state primarily in three ways:

With our self talk, With our focus, With our physiology.

In this article, we will examine self talk. The next statement is a culmination of literally hundreds of hours of research on the subject of human emotional states. Here it is: Facts are facts, our emotions are simply our opinions of the facts. If we can control our opinions, we can control our emotions.

Let me ask you something, "Do you ever talk to yourself?" If you just answered "Yes," rest assured that it's natural and perfectly normal to do so. Let me ask you this, "Do you ever talk to yourself out loud?" If you just answered "Yes! Yes! I do! I do! I do talk to myself out loud!!", well...maybe that's not so normal. But the point is that we all talk to ourselves. If you're not sure, you know that little voice in your head that just asked, "Oh wow man, do I talk to myself?" Yeah well, that's it! It's not what happens around us that determines what we feel. It is what we say to ourselves that does. Now, of course, I am talking about emotional feelings and not physical ones. If upon meeting each other for the first time, you decide to slug me in the mouth, you'd probably hurt me, no matter how much I chanted, "That didn't hurt, that didn't hurt, that didn't hurt." However, if you decided instead to call me a jerk, one of two things would happen.

I could say to myself, now she has only known me for a couple seconds. How did she figure it out so quick? In which case I would probably feel hurt.

Or I could say to myself:

She has probably heard one of my programs and knows I have a strong enough self-image to take this kind of kidding, in which case I would probably feel pretty good.

The point is, it is not what someone says to us, but what we say to ourselves that create our emotions. Let me give you another graphic example of this.

Four years ago, three friends went on a skiing expedition together, Bart, Mark and Mitchell. These three guys went to school together, they graduated together, and even worked at the same construction company together. Fortunately for Mitchell, he is a lousy skier because he was well behind Bart and Mark when they both skied off a 70-foot drop onto uncovered boulders. Both guys were pretty busted up. Both had broken their backs; they both broke both their legs and other bones. Actually they thought Bart was going to die. He was the worst off of the two and had been in a coma for several days. Everyone was relieved, to say the least, when he woke up and immediately complained about being hungry, which, by the way, is very typical for Bart. Even though they were both sentenced to life in a wheelchair, their reactions were 180 degrees opposed. Mark thought his life was over. He thought he couldn't effectively swing a hammer anymore. He thought he could not be nearly as physically active as he once was, he thought all the things he loved to do were now gone, he thought there can't possibly be a God. Life is over. Bart, on the other hand, had always wanted to make a living with his paintings (he was an art major in school), but never could seem to pull himself away from the money the construction business provided. Now, he thought what happened to him was a clear gift from God; finally a clear path to do what he had always wanted to do. He was saddened by his physical limitations but not for long because he saw them as new challenges. His life wasn't over. His new life was just beginning.

Same paths, same sets of circumstances, different self talk, different prospects for life. One more example, and I will bring this idea home.

In the retail car business, the average dealership has a closing rate of around 20%. The average commission is around \$250.00, so for every ten people a salesperson talks to, they average around \$500.00 worth of commissions. How about this? Every time a customer just has enough time to get a brochure and nothing else,

they say to themselves that they just earned \$50.00. Every time a customer who hates sales people and just wants to be left alone -- thank you very much -- that's \$50.00! Every service customer they greet who just bought their car elsewhere and is just killing time -- thank you very much, \$50.00. Is it not true that according to those numbers, we'd get paid \$50.00 for every "Welcome to ABC Motors" we give, regardless of the outcome? Every time we tell ourselves this we get closer and closer to really believing it. If we truly felt this way, do you think we might be inclined to talk to a few more people? If we talked to a few more people, do you think we just might make a few more sales? So take a second, and figure out what each customer you serve means to you based on your own closing rate and average commission. It is certainly worth a try, isn't it?

Behavioralists have determined that eight out of ten of our thoughts are negative. That's 80%! As a matter of fact, did you know that there are roughly two and a half times more words in the English language representing negative emotions than there are for positive ones? Next time you're bored with nothing to do, read the dictionary and count for yourself! You'll see.

Now, my experience has been a little bit different than the above. In many of the workshops I've conducted around the country, I've asked the participants to list out all the emotions or feelings they experience in any given seven day period. Any emotion, any variation of that emotion, any at all. I give them anywhere from three to five minutes to do this. Whether I do this with high school students or a group of sales professionals, the results are just about the same. Virtually every one of them comes up with 10 to 15 different emotions and about 70% of those are negative.

When life presents us with a series of situations, we are forced to quickly evaluate each situation and act accordingly. Since the way we represent each situation to ourselves is through our self talk, the ranges of our emotional experiences are limited to our readily accessible emotional vocabulary. If our readily accessible emotional vocabulary is limited to 10 to 15 words, and 70% of those are negative, is there any wonder why so many of us find ourselves feeling down, depressed or equally as undesirable (as far as I'm concerned) "just okay." Now, I'm aware that most of us know the definitions of considerably more than 10 to 15 words representing emotions or feelings but if we can't quickly retrieve them, we won't experience them. If we habitually use the same 10 or 15, then our life experiences, our emotional repertoire, will be confined to those same limits.

So, as we expand our emotional vocabulary, we need to be sure to establish more positive words than negative. I suggest the ratio of four to one. I also suggest that we expand the readily accessible emotional vocabulary to at least 50 words. We need to not only memorize these new words but to also condition ourselves to use them regularly. This will take time, but with patience, persistence, and practice, this simple exercise can dramatically improve the quality of our lives.

I've often been asked, "Why even have any negative words in there at all?" My stock answer to that is success without failure or happiness without sadness would be as unbearable as life without the prospect of death. We need one to truly appreciate the other.

Self talk can be as obvious as; "Man, I'll never be able to do this." It can be as subtle as; "Oh gosh, I can't remember his name, I can't remember..." as opposed to; "It's right on the tip of my tongue...it's coming to me...coming to me..."

We need to condition ourselves to speak to ourselves the way we would a child we love. We would never speak to a child in a way that would discourage or disempower them. We should treat ourselves with the same respect and reverence.

The Eastern philosophies have a saying that goes something like; "Stand forever diligent at your mind's gate." Pretty good advice if you ask me.

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