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## **SELF TALK:** **BECOMING AWARE OF BELIEF SYSTEMS**

Much of what we feel is caused by what we say to ourselves. Many of us talk to ourselves all day long with little awareness of it. This is because self-talk is generally automatic and carried out repeatedly. When we are not sure why something is the way it is we often start looking outside ourselves for the source of our unhappiness or other form of emotional distress. We have the impression that what is happening around us is what "makes" us feel the way we do. While the outside world is likely to have some contribution to how we are feeling, it is really our thoughts, and mostly the *interpretation* of those thoughts about a particular situation, that cause the way we are feeling.

The equation looks something like this:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{An Event, Situation, or Experience Happens to Me} \\ + \\ \text{My Interpretation of that Event (My Personal Perceptions or the Meanings I give to the} \\ \text{Event)} \\ + \\ \text{The Actions, Emotional Responses, or Behaviors I produce based on the Meanings I have} \\ \text{(consciously or unconsciously) chosen} \\ = \\ \text{Outcomes or Repeating Patterns in My Life} \end{array}$$

Based on this model, what we think about a situation, or rather the interpretations we give to an event, are likely the greatest factors influencing how we feel and subsequently respond. The most positive aspect about this is that once we become aware of our underlying beliefs (cognitions) and perceptions about particular events, we then have more choice and power to change the outcomes. Choices then lead to change in the way we interpret events and think about them and changes in our perception then lead to new outcomes or results in our lives.

It is likely that if we do engage in negative self-talk that we may have been doing it for a long time. It may have even started when we were so young that now it is difficult to actually hear the self-talk as self-talk because it is mistaken for "the truth."



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This negative self-talk may take the form of perfectionism, chronic worrying, identifying as a victim (in other words things are always someone or something else's fault), self-criticism, low self-esteem, phobias, panic attacks, anxiety problems, depression, and hopelessness. It is also possible that when we feel so bad emotionally that it affects us physically. Thus negative self-talk may then take on physical characteristics such as headaches, abdominal stress, digestive problems, muscle-tension, and sleep problems.

Naturally none of these symptoms are always related to negative self-talk and we should always consult a qualified medical provider if such symptoms show up. However, the impact of negative self-talk might be related to the presence or continuation of these symptoms and should be considered in our overall self-care practice of effective coping and containment skills.

The realization that we are responsible for how we feel can be both empowering and annoying. It is empowering because it gives us choice and options. It is annoying because it means we have to take responsibility for our lives and stop blaming others. When we take responsibility for our reactions we begin to take charge and have mastery over our lives. Once we become aware of the distortions in our thinking, we are better able to change negative thoughts into positive and empowering ones. Accomplishing this is one of the most important steps in living a happier, healthier, more effective, and emotionally distress-free life.