STOP NEGATIVE THINKING: WHAT NOT TO SAY WHEN YOU TALK TO YOURSELF

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“How Successful People Think Differently”
and
“How to Deliver a Great TED Talk”

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What You Will Learn

In this booklet, you’re going to learn how to turn crippling negative self-talk into words of empowerment. More specifically, you will learn how to:

- Avoid the kind of self-talk that causes you unnecessary anxiety and worry
- Use the rubber-band technique to snap yourself out of negative self-talk
- Use anchoring to snap out of a negative mindset and into a positive one
- Stop fighting mental scarecrows that ruin your relationships
- Stop asking yourself questions that reduce your self-esteem and make you feel worthless
- Instantly improve your self-talk and mood by changing your physiology
- Use if-then planning to improve your relationships and become more productive
- Stop using “absolute statements” that make you feel insignificant
- Get rid of limiting labels that you put on yourself
- Stop putting limiting labels on your friends, family and colleagues
- Change your behavior by controlling your internal self-talk
- Reprogram your mind so that you’re nourishing yourself with empowering words
- Use visual, auditory and kinesthetic cues to reprogram your mind
- Get past the initial difficult stages of trying to change your self-talk
- Use the right type of self-talk to help you improve your life
- Stop negative thinking and achieve emotional freedom

Change Your Thoughts and You’ll Change Your Life

Once you reprogram your mind to stop the crippling self-talk and instead feed your mind with words of empowerment, you will experience less stress and worry, and experience more happiness, joy and success in your relationships and career. I know it because I’ve lived it! Let’s get started.
Introduction

A couple of years ago, I was reading a book called “Psycho-Cybernetics” and I came across a powerful concept about not fighting mental scarecrows.

The author of the book was referring to the scarecrows inside our heads. Similar to the way a scarecrow is an illusion of a man to scare the birds away, I realized that we have scarecrows inside our heads - illusions that seem real (but aren’t) that cause us to worry and get frustrated and angry.

When I look back at my relationships, I realize that the majority of the fights that I had with my loved ones - my parents, my sister, my girlfriend, my friends - first started in my head before they manifested into my real life.

Negative Self-Talk Ruins Relationships

A couple of years ago, my girlfriend, Chloe, and I used to text each other every day when we were at work. These simple, short texts such as “Hope you’re having a great day” let me know that my girlfriend cared about me. These daily messages had become a part of our relationship and I’d become used to receiving her random texts. Well, one day when her parents came to Hong Kong to visit her, she got tied up with showing them around. I sent her a text message asking how she was doing and waited for a reply. An hour later - I still didn’t have anything. Thinking she’d missed the first one, I sent off another text message and waited. Still nothing. A couple of hours and several text messages later, I still hadn’t heard from her. I knew that she’d read my messages because my phone has a special feature that allowed me to see when a message had been read, so I was getting frustrated that I wasn’t receiving a reply. In my mind, I began to visualize what I would say to her. Here’s the scenario that began playing in my mind:

Me: I sent you seven messages and still didn’t get any reply from you!
Her: Yes, I’m sorry, I was busy showing my parents around.
Me: I know you were busy, but it doesn’t take that much time to reply to a message!
Her: It’s not a big deal. It’s just a text message.
Me: How would you feel if I didn’t reply to your messages? I know you read my
messages, yet you ignored me.

Her: I wasn’t ignoring you, I was busy.

Me: You were ignoring me...you could have taken 30 seconds to let me know what you were up to and let me know you were busy, but you couldn’t be bothered!

Have you ever found yourself painting gloom-and-doom scenarios in your mind before they happen?

The imaginary fight I was having inside my head with Chloe was affecting my mood and emotions the way that an actual fight would. While this mental fight was playing out, I began feeling angrier with her. The result was that when I did see Chloe that night, I was a lot angrier than I should have been.

I find that many fights we have with our loved ones usually start off with the negative thoughts inside our heads that paint these gloom-and-doom scenarios. The negative thoughts cause us to dwell on the negative aspects of our loved ones, making us frustrated and angry. We then carry this frustration and anger into our relationship, which usually results in a fight, which further increases our anger and causes us to feel justified about our position. The end result is that our love for the person we’re arguing with begins to erode until, in some cases, we never want to see the other person again.

**Improve Your Self-Talk and You’ll Improve Your Mood and Behavior**

What if, instead of having these negative thoughts that paint gloom-and-doom scenarios, you could replace them with positive words?

What if, instead of having an imaginary fight with Chloe, I could have had a more positive conversation with myself and told myself that she was probably very busy? What if I had reminded myself that she’d texted me every day without fail for the past two years? Would that have improved my mood? Yes. Would that have improved the quality of my relationship with her that night? Definitely.

Fast forward to today, and Chloe and I have a great relationship. Instead of fighting with the mental scarecrows in our heads, we are both understanding and loving towards each other. We choose to use positive self-talk instead of falling prey to the doom-and-gloom scenarios our brains paint for us when things don’t go as we expected.
So, what made the difference? How did I manage to go from doom-and-gloom scenarios to being able to use positive self-talk to maintain a healthy and happy relationship not only with my girlfriend, but also with my friends and family? The difference was the tools that I learned to help me turn negative self-talk into empowering self-talk - the same tools that I am going to share with you in this booklet.

**Negative Self-Talk Is a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

Negative thoughts don’t just erode our relationships with other people. They also erode our relationships with ourselves. Let me explain. Have you ever gone for a job interview and found yourself thinking, “I shouldn’t be here. I don’t have the right qualifications for this job. They probably won’t like me because I’m not good at interviews.” You label yourself unworthy and your value depreciates in your own eyes. All this negative self-talk ends up being a self-fulfilling prophecy, causing you to further doubt yourself and lose valuable opportunities in life.

**What You Will Learn**

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- Stop using “absolute statements” that make you feel insignificant
- Get rid of limiting labels that you put on yourself
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- Change your behavior by controlling your internal self-talk
- Reprogram your mind so that you’re nourishing yourself with empowering words
- Use visual, auditory and kinesthetic cues to reprogram your mind
• Get past the initial difficult stages of trying to change your self-talk
• Use the right type of self-talk to help you improve your life

Let’s get started.
Chapter One
The Science of Labeling

The Labeling Technique
We use the labeling technique all the time. Some people we label as “intelligent” by consistently showering them with such praise (“Wow, you’re so smart. You always seem to know what to do!”). Unfortunately, other people are we label as “dumb” (“You’re such an idiot! You never do anything correctly!”). And time after time, both these groups prove our expectations correct. Is it that we are good predictors of human behavior? Or is our labeling actually influencing people’s behaviors?

In his bestselling book “YES: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive,” Dr. Robert Cialdini talks about a piece of research on the labeling technique conducted by Alice Tybout and Richard Yalch. In this research, the two experimenters wanted to see if they could use the labeling technique to increase the likelihood that voters would vote on Election Day.

To test this theory, the two researchers interviewed a large number of potential voters. They then randomly assigned half the voters the label of “good citizen” by informing them that based on their interview, they were “above average citizens likely to vote and participate in political events.” The other half was informed that they were “average citizens.”

Now remember, the labels given to the two groups were purely random. If the labeling technique had no effect on people’s behaviors, then we would expect to see an equal number of people from each group vote in the election that was going to be held the week after.

So, what were the results?

Labels Influence Behavior
It turns out that “labeling” people actually influences their behavior. In this case, the group that was informed that they were “above-average” citizens came to believe that this was true and so on Election Day, they were 15% more likely to vote than the “average” group.
Placing Limiting Labels on Others
This has profound consequences for your personal life. Say, for example, that you’re the parent of a child who’s not doing too well in school. If in anger you say things like, “You never work! You’ll never do well!” then you’ve labeled your child as “lazy” and “incapable.” Your child will come to see him/herself as “lazy and incapable” and will act consistently with this image.

If, on the other hand, you want to motivate your child, or anyone else for that matter, then use the labeling technique to remind that person of the potential that they have. Encourage them. Tell them: “You have so much potential to do great things. I know that if you will work hard this coming semester, you’ll get better grades.” and they’ll live up to your expectations.

Placing Limiting Labels on Yourself
We don’t just put limiting labels on others. A lot of the time, we put limiting labels on ourselves. We say to ourselves things such as, “I’m just not good at math.” This limiting label sends a command to our brain telling it to perform poorly at math. In this aspect, our brain is like a computer - it will accept whatever command we give it, regardless of whether it is true or not. This means that if we put rubbish in, we get rubbish out.

Let me give you an example of mental commands. I remember a time when I was seated at the dining table having dinner with my family. Just as we were beginning to eat, my mum turned to me and said, “Akash, can you go get the salt from inside the kitchen cabinet?” Having been to the kitchen cabinet and not remembering seeing the salt, I said, “The salt isn’t in the cabinet. I already checked.” Mum persisted, “Go check again!”

So I grumpily stood up and walked over to the cabinet and looked around. Lo and behold, no salt. I walked back to the table, proclaiming, “Mum, I looked. There’s no salt in the cabinet!”

She insisted again, “It’s right there! Go check again!” I walked back, looked inside the cabinet, and again, no salt! I stormed back: “There isn’t any salt!”

Mum stood up from the table, grabbed me by the ear and pulled me to the kitchen cabinet. She flung open the cabinet doors, and right there - right in front of my eyes - was the kitchen salt!
After having shared this story with a lot of my seminar participants, I know that this is a very common experience for most people. Have you ever had a similar experience? Mental commands can be so powerful that they can make you blind to physical objects which are right in front of your eyes.

A mental command such as “I can’t find the salt” won’t have life-changing consequences. However, think of the limiting labels that you’ve put on yourself, such as “I’m not a confident person” or “I’m not good at interviews” or “I can’t speak in public.” These limiting labels do have major consequences on your life. As a result of these limiting labels, you miss out on many opportunities.

**Labels Can Be Changed**

One of the labels that I had put on myself was “I can’t speak in public.” As a teenager, I was very shy. I was the person who always sat at the back of the class hoping that the teacher wouldn’t call on me because I was too terrified of speaking in front of my classmates. During lunch, I would sit with my friends but would not say anything because I was scared of voicing my thoughts out loud. And when it came to talking to girls - well, that was mission impossible!

Let’s fast forward to today. Now I’ve been ranked as one of the top speakers in Asia Pacific. I’ve won over 40 public speaking awards and I make a living as a professional speaker. I don’t share these accomplishments to impress you, but to impress upon you that limiting labels can be removed. You can consciously choose to remove a limiting label and replace it with a more empowering one.

So, how was I able to remove my limiting label?

When I was studying in Hong Kong, I read the research that I shared with you earlier on the power of labeling. Realizing that I was labeling myself by thinking, “I can’t speak in public,” I made a conscious decision to change the label. I decided to change the label to “I am getting better at public speaking.” I followed this with action to back up my new label - I joined Toastmasters International, which is a group dedicated to helping people improve their public speaking skills. At the meetings, I volunteered to give speeches, which helped back up my new label that I was getting better. Even when my speeches weren’t as good as I hoped for - I stumbled over my words and forgot what I was saying
- I walked away from the experience saying to myself, “I’m getting better. It’s a process, and each time I speak, I walk away a little better than I was before.” This shift in mindset helped me become more confident when speaking and eventually, after close to a hundred speeches, I had finally gotten to the point where I was honestly able to say to myself, “I’m good at public speaking.” Because I changed my internal self-talk, I was able to turn public speaking from something that frightened me to something that I am passionate about and make a living from.

8-Step Process for Changing a Label

1. The first step in solving any problem is to acknowledge that there is a problem. This means that you need to acknowledge that you have placed a limiting label on yourself. While there may be many limiting labels you’ve placed on yourself, choose to work on only one label at a time. Trying to change too many labels at once will most likely result in you being unable to change any of them.

2. Look at how much the limiting label is costing you. What opportunities are you missing out on because of living with this label? How much more would you be able to accomplish if you were able to get rid of this limiting label?

3. Make a conscious decision to change the label. Decide that you will no longer live with the limiting label.

4. In order to successfully remove a limiting label, you need to replace the limiting label with a more empowering label. Choose a new, empowering label for yourself.

5. Your brain will most likely immediately reject your new label. For example, if your old label was “I am very shy,” adopting the new label “I am confident” will cause you to feel like you’re lying to yourself. Therefore, instead of adopting the new label immediately, adopt a transition label that shows you’re making progress towards your desired label, e.g., “I am becoming a more confident person.”

6. Take action to help justify your transition label. For example, if you are trying to become more confident, you might challenge yourself to go outside your comfort zone and deliver a speech or talk to a new person. Taking action is crucial because it will justify to your brain that your new label is correct. It will stop you from feeling you’re lying to yourself and instead make you realize that you’re actually
becoming more confident. Once you’ve done this, you can congratulate yourself because you now have a more positive label which no longer cripples you.

7. It’s likely that when you go outside your comfort zone and take action towards adopting your desired label, you will fail. If you fail (e.g., your speech is horrible or the new person you try to talk to rejects you), tell yourself, “Failure is a part of the process. I am getting better simply by trying.”

8. Keep taking action to become more and more comfortable with your new transition label. It might take some time but you’ll eventually get to a point where, like me, you are completely comfortable with your new label.

In a Nutshell

- Science has proven that labels influence people’s behaviors, so be careful about what label you put on others.
- Negative self-talk usually leads to limiting labels. These limiting labels cause you to lose out on many opportunities in life.
- Make a conscious decision to remove your limiting label and replace it with a more empowering label with the eight-step process outlined in the chapter.
During my teenage years, I had a difficult relationship with my dad. Most teenage boys go through a phase where they lash out against authority, and I was no different. My dad had big dreams for me - but I lashed out against him for pressuring me to improve. When I came home with a B on my report card, he would tell me that I could get an A if I tried harder. Those were meant to be words of encouragement, but to me they sounded like criticism. One day after showing Dad my report card and him encouraging me to work harder, I shouted at him for putting undue stress on me. We had a bitter argument and I went to bed angry.

Imaginary Fights Feel like Real Fights
Over the next couple of years, I began having imaginary fights with my father. These fights didn’t take place in the physical realm, but instead took place in my imagination. I refer to these imaginary fights as “mental scarecrows” because they look like they are real but they’re not.

At the end of every school term, when report cards were issued, I would imagine my father fighting with me about my grades. In my imagination, I would retaliate against him and we’d have a huge shouting match.

In real life though, Dad had become a lot more understanding. He praised me for working hard and instead of focusing on the subjects I hadn’t done well in, he focused on the improvements I’d made. He encouraged me to improve as much as I could, but I never felt pressured by him again.

However, in my mind, I was having lots of fights with Dad. My relationship with him began to worsen. I stopped confiding in him. I tried to avoid seeing him and stayed locked up in my room because I hated the imaginary fights I was having with him. Dad was quite hurt by my behavior, but he understood that I was going through the teenage phase and like an understanding father gave me the space that I needed.
Examining Your Thoughts
Then, one day, after I began examining my own thoughts, I came to the realization that I was treating Dad very unfairly. Call it a sudden a flashbulb moment or sudden insight or divine intervention, but for some reason that I don’t quite know of, I came to the conclusion that it was me - not my dad - who was to blame. He wasn’t doing anything to hurt me, yet, because of the thoughts in my mind, I was punishing him for imaginary fights that he wasn’t even responsible for!

Snap Out of It!
From that day on, I began paying a lot more attention to what conversations went on inside my head. Whenever I found myself thinking negatively about my father or playing out a negative situation in my mind, I would mentally snap myself out of it and tell myself, “It’s not a real situation! Stop thinking so negatively and start focusing on something more positive.” I would consciously snap myself out of the negative thinking mode, and over time, I stopped having these imaginary fights. In other words, I coached and trained my mind to stop thinking negatively and start thinking positively. I believe that there is no better coach for you than yourself.

Was it easy to snap myself out of the negative mindset? No. Was it worth it? Absolutely. My relationship with Dad improved because I no longer was fighting with him in my head, and that allowed me to see my father for who he really was: a man who deeply loved me and cared for me and not the pressuring, critical man I had made him out to be in my head.

Imaginary Fights Drain You of Energy
Are there people in your life with whom you are constantly arguing in your head? Perhaps these people are at fault and have caused you undue harm, but that is no reason for you to devote so much mental energy to quarreling with them in your head. It doesn’t make the situation any better and only makes you feel worse - it drains you of the positive energy you need to happily live your life.

Perhaps, once you examine the conversations in your mind, you might even find, like me, that your imaginary arguments with the person in your head have prevented you from seeing the actual person as they are in real life.
The Rubber-Band Technique
Telling yourself “snap out of it!” may not be enough for you to snap out of a negative mindset. You might need something more. In that case, you can use a technique that my fellow speaker Ed Tate uses. Ed wears a rubber band around his wrist so that whenever he catches himself thinking negatively, he snaps the rubber band and that causes him to snap out of his negative thinking.

Anchoring: Snap Your Finger
Have you heard of Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov’s findings on classical conditioning? If you’ve studied psychology, you’re no doubt familiar with Pavlov’s research. In this research, Pavlov used bells to call his dogs to food. In other words, he paired the food and the bell together. After doing this numerous times, Pavlov rang the bell alone (no food was presented) to see how the dogs would respond. The results were that the dogs responded by salivating at the sound of the bell even though there was no food presented. Why? Because the dogs learned to associate the sound of the bell with the food.

Scientist John Watson took Pavlov’s work on conditioning and applied it to humans. In a study conducted in 1921, Watson took an 11-month-old infant named Albert and tested whether he could condition Albert to become scared of a white rat by pairing the rat with a very loud noise. Initially, when Albert was presented with the rat, Albert was unafraid. However, after the loud noise was repeatedly paired with the rat, Albert soon developed a fear of rats.

All this research shows that, through repetition, it’s possible to condition people too. While this may not sound like a good thing, we can use it to our advantage by conditioning you to think positively. We’re going to pair the snapping of your fingers (like the sound of the bell) with very positive, happy memories so that every time you snap your fingers, it immediately brings back the positive memories and puts you into a positive mindset. This is a technique from neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) called anchoring and it’s a technique which has worked very well for me.
3-Step Process for Creating an Anchor

Here’s how we’re going to create your anchor for positive thoughts:

1. Think of a past experience when you were very happy. Begin to relive the memory in your head. Make the sounds, smells and colors richer and more magnificent until you feel the happiness coming from inside you.

2. When you feel happiest (at the peak of your emotional state), take your thumb and your middle finger and make a snapping sound. This will be the anchor (the stimulus) to which we will hook the positive emotions you felt.

3. Come back into a neutral emotional state. Take a short break and then repeat the steps again. Keep repeating all the steps until you’re able to get into a positive mental state almost instantly simply by snapping your fingers. This exercise will require effort and repetition on your part, but it is well worth it.

Congratulations, you’ve now created an anchor you can use to snap you out of your negative mindset and into a positive one instead. Please note that this anchor isn’t a magic key that will always and instantly snap you out of your negative mindset. I have found that when I am extremely caught up in my negativity, I have a hard time snapping out of that mindset even though I use this anchor. However, the physical act of snapping my fingers and the snap! sound do lessen negativity’s grip on me. I continue snapping my fingers and focusing on trying to get my happy memory back. By doing so, I am able to let go of the negativity and begin focusing on something more positive instead.
Chapter Three
Are You Asking Yourself the Right Questions?

When you talk to yourself, what questions are you asking yourself?

The quality of your life depends on the quality of the answers that you have, and the quality of the answers that you have depends on the quality of the questions that you ask yourself. This means that if you want to get good answers, you need to ask yourself good questions.

As an example, Anthony Robbins, the famous motivational speaker, said, “If you ask yourself, ‘Why do I eat like such a pig?’ your brain is going to respond, ‘Because you are a pig!’” This is a low-quality question which gives you a low quality answer.

How often do you go around asking yourself low-quality questions such as “Why am I so clumsy?” “Why can’t I do anything right?” or “Why am I so dumb?” The problem with these low-quality questions is that they place negative labels on you. When you ask yourself, “Why can’t I do anything right?” your brain shoots back, “Because you’re an idiot.” You’ve labeled yourself an idiot and because your brain doesn’t want to be wrong, it starts acting in accordance with the label it’s put on you.

When I was a teenager, I regularly kept asking myself, “What is wrong with me? Why can’t I get a girlfriend?” Upon asking this question, my brain shot back, “Because you have such a big nose and girls find that very unattractive!” I was particularly concerned about my big nose and I often used to think about getting nose surgery done so that I wouldn’t look so unappealing to women. This obsession with the size of my nose - thanks to the low-quality questions I was asking myself - made me a shy and reserved individual. I had very little self-confidence and self-esteem, and ironically it was my lack of confidence rather than the size of my nose that made me unattractive to women.

Let’s fast forward to today and I’m dating a gorgeous girl who I’m madly in love with. Without sounding like I’m blowing my own horn, I’ve even had girls tell me that they find me “very attractive,” “cute” and “charming.” What happened? Did my nose get smaller? Did I get nose surgery? No, my nose is just as big, if not bigger. However, what did change is the quality of the questions that I was asking myself. Instead of asking myself, “Why do girls find me so unattractive?” I began asking myself, “How can I become more dateable? How can I become the type of guy that women are attracted
to? These questions gave me better, more constructive answers. My brain gave me answers such as, “I can become more confident,” to which I asked myself, “How?” I came up with answers such as “I can read books on how to become more confident. I can force myself to talk to more people. I can join an after-school society to develop a more interesting social life.” These answers were constructive answers that I could act upon.

Questions are important because they determine what you focus on, and the more you focus on something, the more you get of it. In one of his seminars, Anthony Robbins tells his audience members to take part in the following activity. I want you to do it too: If you’re sitting in a room, look around the room for anything that is blue. Spend 30 seconds looking for anything that is blue. Ok, now close your eyes and list out everything that is red!

How many red objects did you manage to list? If you’re like most people, you had a difficult time listing anything that was red.

OK, now look around the room for anything that is red. Spend 30 seconds looking around the room for anything that is red. Now close your eyes and list out everything that is red.

How many red items did you manage to list? I’m betting quite a lot more than the first time around.

Why? Because your brain focuses on what you ask of it. When you ask yourself, “What blue objects are there in this room?” you’re going to get items which are blue. When you ask yourself, “What objects in this room are red?” you’re going to find items which are red. Similarly, if you ask yourself, “Why am I such an idiot?” your brain is going to list out all the reasons you’re an idiot!

So if you want to change your life, you first need to start by changing the questions you ask yourself.

Another important principle about asking questions is making sure that your questions focus on the present and the future, instead of focusing on the past. For example, if you make a mistake, don’t focus on the past by asking yourself, “How could I have not seen that mistake?” Such a question will result in your brain giving you a list of excuses such as “Because you’re not educated enough!” or “Because you’re an idiot!”
Instead of focusing on the past, make sure your questions focus on the future, such as “What can I do to ensure I don’t make the same mistake in the future?” The future-based questions give you constructive answers that can help you avoid making mistakes. Similarly, you can ask yourself, “What can I do to improve in the future?”

You can’t change the past, so stop asking yourself questions that focus on the past. You can create your future, so ask yourself questions that focus on creating a better future for yourself.

**In a Nutshell**

- Questions determine what you focus on, and the more you focus on something, the more you get of it.
- Change the quality of your questions and you’ll change the quality of your life.
- When you make a mistake (we all do!), instead of asking yourself, “Why am I such an idiot?” ask yourself, “What can I do to improve?”
- Avoid questions which place negative labels on you, such as “Why am I so lazy?” and instead ask yourself questions such as “How can I be more hardworking?” which have positive labels
Chapter Four  
Absolute Statements

Early on in my relationship with Chloe, we had a small fight about something. I don’t remember what we fought about, but I do remember how hurt she was by what I told her. In my anger, I told her, “You’ve never done anything to show me you care about me!”

The pain on Chloe’s face was obvious when she asked, “I never do anything for you?”

Fortunately, since then I have matured considerably in my relationship with Chloe and we now have a very happy relationship, thanks to the tools that I learned which I’m sharing with you in this book. However, it was on that day that I realized the power of absolute statements such as “always” and “never.”

Did Chloe never do anything to show me she cared for me? No. I can think of lots of times that she went out of her way to do something nice for me. However, in the heat of the moment, blinded by my anger, I accused her of “never” doing anything for me. Have you ever made absolute statements in your relationship, such as: “You never take out the trash” or “You always forget my birthday!”? Absolute statements hurt the accused party because they neglect to take into account the times when the statements weren’t true (e.g., when your husband went out of his way to take out the trash or when your wife remembered your birthday and threw you a surprise party).

We have to be careful about using absolute statements on others because rarely are absolute statements true. Furthermore, when you use absolute statements, such as telling your children, “You never do your homework!” you’re labeling them as such. And guess what? Your children are going to live up to the label you put on them.

So, what should you say to your children instead? Should you turn a blind eye to their laziness and pretend they always do their homework when they don’t?

No, I’m not encouraging you to turn a blind eye to reality. However, what I am asking you to do is to focus on the positives. For example, you could say to your child, “You usually do your homework, but for the past two weeks your teacher says you haven’t finished your assignments. What can we do in the future to make sure that you complete your assignments?” The benefit of this statement is that it gives your child a
positive label - it labels your child as someone who usually does his homework and paints the scenario of not doing homework as an exception that is not a true reflection of who he is. As a result, your child will be more likely to start doing his homework again in order to align his actions with the positive label you’ve put on him.

However, what if your child doesn’t usually do his homework? What do you say to him in this case? Again, instead of focusing on the negatives, I suggest that you focus on the positive. If there is nothing currently positive to focus on, focus on your child’s potential. Say to your child, “I know you can do very well if you study hard. And I know that you’ll work hard and complete your homework because I believe you will grow up to be a person who is reliable and responsible.”

I know, you might be thinking, “That’s not going to work! If only it were that easy to change your child’s behavior!” Most parents know that changing your children’s behaviors is extremely difficult and telling your kids you believe they’ll work hard is usually not going to result in immediate success. However, science shows that the labeling technique works. Labels do influence behavior. While on the surface it may seem that your words are having very little or no effect, on the subconscious level, your words are causing a shift in how your child sees himself, and that will impact how he behaves. I know several men who have told me that as teenagers, they were lazy, irresponsible boys who would most likely have ended up in prison, but who are now successful, responsible men whose lives changed for the better because they met someone - a mentor or a counselor or a teacher - who believed in them. Words and labels have tremendous power, and believing in your child’s potential - even when present circumstances might cause you to doubt your child - can be the seed of positivity that your child needs to turn his life around.

Similarly, be very careful about using absolute statements on yourself. Using absolute statements on yourself can be very dangerous. I know this because I’ve lived it.

I remember a time when I was in high school that I had to attend a meeting for a group project that I was working on with my classmates. The meeting was scheduled after lunch, but I was having so much fun with my friends that I forgot about the meeting. When I did remember the meeting, I rushed to the meeting thinking, “I’m such an idiot for forgetting about this meeting!”
Over the years, I was usually on time for most meetings, but there were a couple that I was inevitably late for. After a couple of times, my internal dialogue changed to “I’m never on time for meetings!” I even began telling my friends and colleagues that “I’m the kind of person who’s never on time!” Soon, this statement turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. No matter how early I left, I would always somehow arrive late!

By this time, I had accepted the fact that I was never going to be on time for meetings so I stopped trying. This went on for some time until my colleagues became so frustrated with me that I had no choice but to change my behavior. I began by examining my inner dialogue and realized that it was responsible for my lateness. By saying to myself, “I never arrive on time for meetings,” I was labeling myself as the person who would never be on time. When I changed this inner dialogue to “I am the kind of person who respects other people’s time and arrives on time for meetings,” I began seeing an improvement. I began arriving on time for more and more meetings. By labeling myself as someone who was prompt and someone who respected other people’s time, I managed to start arriving on time more and more regularly.

Let me share with you another example of one of my mentors, a professional speaker and comedian by the name of Darren LaCroix. When Darren first got up on stage to do his first-ever comedy routine, he bombed horribly. He was nervous, he forgot what he was saying and fumbled with his notes. It was a disappointing routine. The audience didn’t laugh at any of his jokes, except one. Out of his whole routine, they laughed at just one thing. That’s a horrible ratio for someone who intends to be a professional comedian.

What do you think most people would have done at this point? How would they have viewed their own performance? Most people would say, “That was a horrible routine. No one laughed at my jokes! The entire routine was crap. I guess I’m just not meant to be a comedian.” Most people would have looked at their performance on stage and concluded that because no one laughed at their jokes, they failed. But let’s examine that thought. Did no one laugh at Darren’s jokes? No, one or two people did. Were all his jokes not funny? No, one of them was funny. Was the entire routine a failure? No, one section of his routine was successful at getting the audience to laugh.
Instead of looking at the entire performance as a failure, Darren said to himself, “One moment in my routine was funny. If I can figure out what made that moment funny, I can learn how to replicate it.”

Nowadays, Darren is a highly paid professional speaker - and a very funny one at that! People travel halfway across the world to attend his humor boot camps. Darren managed to succeed because he controlled his inner dialogue. Instead of using absolute statements such as “The whole comedy routine was a failure” and generalizing, “That means I am a complete failure at being a comic,” Darren looked at the one moment that was successful and changed his inner dialogue to focus on that.

So here’s the key takeaway lesson. When you find yourself using absolute statements such as “I never get anything right” or “I always forget the car keys” or “He always disrespects me!” ask yourself, “Is that 100% correct? Are there times when I do get things and when I do remember the key cars? Are there times when he does show me the respect I deserve?” My bet is that when you start questioning your absolute statements, the change in inner dialogue will help you deal with the situation more appropriately.
“If she doesn’t text me back, then I’m going to get so angry!”

“If he arrives late, then I’m going to be so disappointed!”

“If she arrives late, then I’m going to be furious!”

If you’ve read my book, “The Science of Success,” then you know that if-then plans are a very powerful tool for achieving success. Study after study has revealed that using if-then planning can double or even triple your chances of success. For example, let’s say that your goal is to lose weight. However, you find it very difficult to get the motivation to get out of bed in the morning and go to the gym. According to scientific research, if-then planning can help you triple your chances of getting to the gym. Setting an if-then plan - i.e., telling yourself, “If it’s 6 a.m. then I will jump out bed, take a shower, put on my gym gear and go to the gym to exercise for an hour before breakfast” - will make it three times as likely that you will make it to the gym as compared to not having an if-then plan. I know if-then plans work because I am using if-then plans to write this very book!

I hold a full-time job, and it can be very difficult to find the motivation to write a book after an exhausting day’s work. However, I set myself an if-then plan when I am at work - “If it’s 7 p.m. and I’m at home, I will work on my book for an hour no matter how exhausted I am.” This mental planning and commitment has helped me write on days when I would much rather have just sat back and watched an episode of Friends on my laptop.

What’s all this got to do with self-talk?

I have found that a lot of people - including myself - make if-then plans when we are in a situation that we do not like. The boyfriend who is kept waiting at the restaurant says to himself, “If she isn’t here within the next 15 minutes, I am going to be very angry.” When the girlfriend doesn’t arrive on time, the boyfriend, sure enough, calls her up and shouts and screams at her. Sure, the girlfriend might have been wrong to keep her lover waiting, but what if she had a reasonable excuse for being late? What if she had genuinely been stuck in traffic? Or she had some other valid reason that prevented her
from making it to the meeting on time? By making the if-then plan, “If she’s late, then I’m going to be angry,” the boyfriend eliminates all possibilities of a rational conversation.

Another guy who goes through the same situation might make a different if-then plan: “If she’s late, then I’m going to call her, ask if she’s OK and find out why she’s running late.” Or he might say to himself, “If she’s late, then I’ll calmly tell her that her being late makes me feel like she disrespects my time. I’ll also kindly ask her to arrive on time for future dates.”

Both guys are going through the same situation, yet they each have different inner dialogues (if-then plans) and therefore they will each react very differently.

If you were in that situation, which of the two people would you rather be?

The if-then plans you make with yourself can have profound influences on your behavior, and therefore on your relationships and your career.

A couple of years ago, when I was struggling to write my first book, I didn’t know the importance of if-then planning. I had told myself that I was going to write a book, but I would keep telling myself, “If I get home from work and I’m feeling tired, I’ll write my book tomorrow.” As a result, I kept postponing working on my book. Tomorrow never came! However, after learning the importance of if-then plans from several books on psychology, I began monitoring my inner dialogue, and especially the if-then plans I was setting. I decided that since if-then plans are so powerful, I was going to start using them to my benefit. That’s when I started telling myself, “If I get home from work at 7 p.m., then I’ll sit down and write one page of my book.” The results because of changing my if-then plans have been remarkable! I have now written over 11 books and continue to use if-then plans to further my career as a writer.
Chapter Six
Change Your Physiology, Change Your Thoughts

Let’s compare someone who is extremely happy and confident versus someone who is depressed.

In terms of how they stand, how would the two individuals differ?

How would the happy, confident person stand? They would stand with their back straight, shoulders back, chest out and head held high.

How would the person stand who was depressed? They would stand with their back hunched, shoulders drooped, chest caved in and head hanging low.

We know that happy, confident people stand and use their body differently from those who are depressed. We also know that people who are happy and confident think differently than those who are depressed. In other words, how we think affects how we stand and use our body. If we are thinking happy, cheerful thoughts, we stand straight and tall. If we are thinking negative thoughts, we stand with our shoulders drooped and head hanging low. Naturally, this makes you wonder: If our thoughts can influence our physiology (our posture and how we use our body), is it also possible that we can change our thoughts by changing our physiology?

A researcher by the name of Amy Cuddy went about trying to answer this very question. In her TED talk, Amy talked about how our body language affects how we feel:

“So when we think of nonverbals, we think of how we judge others, how they judge us and what the outcomes are. We tend to forget, though, the other audience that’s influenced by our nonverbals, and that’s ourselves.”

- Amy Cuddy, TED Talk (http://bit.ly/Sy8qad)

Amy found that changing your body language, i.e., your physiology, changes how you feel. If you adopt a power posture and stand with your shoulders back and head up even when you’re not feeling confident, you eventually do start to feel more confident. As a result, the inner dialogue that you’re having in your head also changes into a more positive one.

Most of us know that your thoughts affect your feelings and your feelings affect your physiology (body language).
Thoughts >> Feelings >> Physiology

However, not many people realize that the reverse relationship also exists:

Physiology >> Feelings >> Thoughts

In other words, if you change your physiology (i.e., your body language), that will change how you feel and that in turn will change your thinking and your inner dialogue. So if you want to feel better and start having a more positive inner dialogue, start first by changing your physiology.

As a professional speaker, I am well aware of the connections among physiology, feelings and inner dialogue. One of the first major international speaking contracts I received was to give a two full-day public speaking workshop to yoga teachers in Thailand. Now, I am not a yogi. In fact, I’d never been to a yoga class before. I accepted the assignment because the workshop was on public speaking skills - a topic I am an expert on.

The yoga company that was hiring me flew me to Thailand a day before my workshop date and put me up in a very fancy hotel. It was the same hotel that the yoga teachers (who’d flown in from all around the world for the yoga teacher training course) were staying at. During dinner, I got to meet many of the participants who would be attending my workshop.

I vividly remember talking to a beautiful yoga teacher whose name was Crystal. Crystal was in her late fifties, but she looked younger than 30! Crystal told me that she’d been teaching yoga for over 20 years. Many of the yoga teachers who would be attending my workshop were highly experienced yoga teachers.

The next morning when I woke up to have breakfast before my workshop, I began freaking out. My heart was beating wildly in my chest. “Who are you lying to?” said a little voice in my head. “You can’t teach public speaking to these guys! They are a lot more experienced than you. You don’t even do yoga, and you’re supposed to teach them how to speak to their yoga class?”

The negative thoughts in my head would just not stop. Soon, I was sitting slouched over on the edge of the bed, saying to myself, “I’ll just tell the yoga company that I’m not the right person for the job. I’ll apologize and refund all their money, including the flight and
hotel costs. Or I’ll just pretend I’m sick. They can’t force me to speak if I’m not feeling well.”

That day, I almost robbed myself of one of the best opportunities of my life. I would have chickened out had I not taken control of my inner dialogue. The first thing I did was change what I was saying to myself. I began telling myself, “I was hired for this job because I’m a public speaking expert. I know what I’m talking about because I’ve won over 40 public speaking awards. The students know that I don’t do yoga and they don’t expect me to teach them yoga - they have another teacher who’s going to teach them that. They expect me to teach them public speaking, which is something that I can definitely do.”

Changing what I was saying to myself helped, but I still wasn’t feeling fully confident and prepared to do my workshop. So I changed my body language. I stood up off the bed, puffed my chest out and held my head high. Thirty seconds later there was a noticeable difference in how I was feeling. Instead of wanting to run away from the event, I was actually looking forward to it. My inner dialogue had changed from, “I’m not the right person for this” to “I’m so excited because this is the biggest opportunity of my career to date.”

Try this strategy the next time you are feeling nervous before a speech, a date or a job interview. First, change your inner dialogue so that it’s helping. Next, change your body language and stand in a confident posture. The combination of changing your physiology and your inner dialogue will be a powerful force that will help make your speech, date or interview a great success.

You might be wondering, “Akash, how did the workshop go? Did changing your inner dialogue and your physiology work?” Of course, otherwise I wouldn’t be telling you about it.

When I got up on the stage to deliver my workshop, my heart began rapidly beating in my chest and the negative thoughts came flooding back, but I shut them out. I adopted a confidence-posture and within 30 seconds, I was feeling confident and enthusiastic about my speech. The workshop went great - which was reflected on the evaluation forms that the workshop participants filled out at the end of the event. In fact, it went so well that the yoga company invited me back to run two other workshops during that year. I have been invited back to run the same workshops every year since, and this June
I will be heading to Thailand again to conduct another public speaking workshop for yoga teachers. And just imagine I almost let my inner-dialogue talk me out of such a wonderful opportunity...
Chapter Seven
Priming Your Brain

A powerful way to reduce your negative self-talk is by priming your brain for positivity. What is priming? To answer that question, let’s go to New York University, where in 1961 a group of professors conducted the following experiment.

In the study, the professors randomly assigned students into one of three groups. The three groups were given a scrambled sentence test in which they had to arrange a group of scrambled words into a sentence (e.g., the following scrambled sentence: “Yorkers New polite are” would be arranged to “New Yorkers are polite”).

One group of students - we’ll call it Group A - was given scrambled sentences containing words which referred to rudeness, such as “disturb,” “bother” and “intrude.” The other group - Group B - was given scrambled sentences containing words which referred to politeness, such as “patient,” “courteous” and “cordially.” The third group was given neutral words such as “exercising,” “occasionally” and “normally.”

The students were told that the purpose of their test was to gauge their language abilities. The actual purpose of the test, however, was to determine how the words presented to students would affect their behavior in the next part of the experiment.

In the next part of the experiment, after the students had finished independently working on their scrambled sentence test, they were told to go down the hall so they could get their next experiment from another office. When they arrived at the office, they would find a stooge asking the experimenter a series of questions, forcing the students to wait. This is the part that the researchers were most interested in - how long would the students wait before they interrupted the conversation between the stooge and the experimenter?

On average, students who had been exposed to words related to politeness interrupted 9 minutes and 3 seconds into the exchange. Students who had been exposed to the neutral words interrupted, on average, 8 minutes and 65 seconds into the exchange. Students who had been exposed to the words related to rudeness interrupted, on average, 5 minutes and 43 seconds into the exchange.
In other words, the participants’ behaviors were unconsciously influenced by the words they had seen. In psychology, this effect is called priming.

“Priming is an implicit memory effect in which exposure to a stimulus influences a response to a later stimulus. It can occur following perceptual, semantic, or conceptual stimulus repetition. For example, if a person reads a list of words including the word table, and is later asked to complete a word starting with tab, the probability that he or she will answer table is greater than if they are not primed.” - Wikipedia

In another experiment on the power of priming, participants were randomly allocated into one of two groups. Group A was told to think and write down words related to being a college professor, whereas Group B was told to think and write down words related to being a soccer hooligan. Next, the participants were given a list of challenging questions to answer. The participants who had written down attributes related to being a college professor (“smart,” “intelligent,” “capable“) got 55.6% whereas participants who were told to write down words related to being a soccer hooligan got only 42.6% of the questions correct. In other words, simply thinking about being smart put the participants into a “smart” mindset that allowed them to get more answers correct.

The implications of this research are profound. Here are three techniques you can use to prime your brain for positivity:

1. VISUAL INPUTS

Studies on learning show that there are three types of learners: visual learners, auditory learners and kinesthetic learners.

The majority of people are visual learners, which means that they learn best by seeing things. If you’re a visual learner, there are several things you can do to prime your brain for success:

- **Put up inspirational quotes and posters on the walls of your home.** When you see these motivational quotes and posters every morning, the positive message will seep into your subconscious brain and motivate and inspire you. I’m a visual
learner, so I have posters containing inspirational quotes in my bedroom and even in my office.

- **Watch positive TV shows and documentaries.** Whenever I walk out of the cinema having watched a movie with a lot of fighting scenes in it, my adrenaline levels are high and I feel ready to get into a boxing match.

  I remember when I was in Kenya for a short holiday. I’d just finished watching the movie *Max Payne*, a movie which contained a lot of fighting scenes. It was almost midnight when the movie ended. The streets of Kenya are not very safe at night, but I was feeling so pumped up and aggressive after having watched the movie that I thought to myself, “I’m going to walk to my hotel instead of taking a taxi. If anyone tries to attack me, I’m just going to kick their a#$!” It was a stupid and risky decision I made because my brain had been primed for aggressive behavior, but fortunately I got back to my hotel safely.

  I expect this same priming effect when I watch romantic movies. When I finished watching the super-romantic movie *The Notebook* I called up my girlfriend in the middle of the night to tell her I loved her. If I watch a funny movie, I am able to make my friends laugh a lot more than when I watch a serious movie. If I watch a depressing movie, it can dampen my spirits and ruin my entire day.

  I share these examples with you to illustrate that the movies and documentaries we watch do unconsciously affect our behavior (even if we think they don’t). While I still do enjoy watching the occasional action movie, I am very careful about what images I put into my head. I prime my brain for happiness and success by choosing to watch funny comedies and inspirational movies and documentaries.

  What are you choosing to watch? How does that affect you?

2. **AUDITORY INPUTS**
While I am primarily a visual learner, other people are auditory learners. In other words, they learn best by listening. If you’re an auditory learner:

- **Listen to positive messages.** Have some inspirational CDs that you listen to on your way to work. It can brighten up your day considerably. Similarly, choose to listen to positive songs instead of music that promotes violence and depression and negativity.

Even though I am primarily a visual learner, my secondary learning preference is auditory. One of my favorite rappers is Eminem. As a speech writer, I am in awe of his ability to use words to get his message across. However, I find that when I listen to some of Eminem’s intensely aggressive songs, I find myself feeling and being more aggressive than I normally am. For example, Eminem has a song called *Love the Way You Lie*, which he recorded with Rihanna. I admire Eminem’s lyrical talent, but the song is a very aggressive one. It talks about a very destructive and violent relationship between a couple. Even though I am absolutely in love with my girlfriend, I find that after I listen to the song a couple of times, I start having negative thoughts towards my girlfriend. I start picturing myself having a fight with my girlfriend simply because of having listened to the song (and watched the music video). As a result, I have become a lot more careful about which songs I listen to. I believe that the mornings are especially important because the way your brain is primed in the morning can affect the outcome of the rest of the day, so I choose to prime my brain for happiness by listening to positive and upbeat songs when I wake up in the morning.

What are you listening to? Are you listening to inspirational CDs that help you grow? Are you listening to songs that lift you up rather than bring you down?

### 3. KINESTHETIC INPUTS

Finally, other people learn best by doing. For these types of people, the best way to turn their self-talk to something positive is to do positive things:

- **Do something kind for someone.** When you’re having a very bad day or having a very negative conversation with yourself, do something nice for someone. Help
out someone in need. The act of doing something kind for another person will lift your spirits as well as theirs. This is why many people who are going through hardships say that their best way to cope with hardship is by helping lessen someone else’s. Start off your day by doing something nice for someone and it will have a positive impact on the rest of your day. This could be as simple as giving money to the poor old woman on the street. Or surprising your spouse by washing their car before they get home. Or simply holding the door open for someone. Small acts of kindness can have big impact on your day.

• **Engage in a positive activity.** When you’re having a very negative dialogue with yourself, you can change it by engaging in a positive activity. Feeling stressed about work and can’t seem to stop criticizing yourself for a mistake that you’ve made? Go out and play with your kids. Go for a jog. Go out for dinner with your friends.

• **Change your body language.** We already talked about this in the last chapter. Change your physiology and you’ll change your thoughts and that will change how you feel about yourself and how you talk to yourself.

While you may prefer one learning style over another, everyone learns through all three methods (visual, auditory and kinesthetic). If you want to change your inner dialogue, use a combination of the above strategies so that you’re putting positive visual and auditory messages into your head as well as engaging in positive behaviors. Once you do that, your inner dialogue will become a lot more positive. The upside of that is that you’ll not only feel better about yourself because you’ll have a better perception of yourself, you’ll also be a better person.
Chapter Eight
Wrap Up

Our thoughts are powerful. What we say to ourselves can influence not just our image of ourselves, but also the quality of our relationships and the quality of our lives.

LIMITING LABELS
Negative self-talk can place limiting labels on us. These are labels that stop us from experiencing everything that life has to offer - labels that stop us from fulfilling our true potential. If we want to live a positive, rich and full life, to experience everything that life has to offer us, we must let go of our limiting labels. (Use the 8-step process in Chapter One to remove your limiting labels and replace them with more positive ones.)

Similarly, we must be careful not to place limiting labels on those around us. Often, without meaning to, we place limiting labels on those closest to us - our friends and our family. Out of anger or frustration, we put labels on them that they might carry around with them for the rest of their lives.

MENTAL SCARECROWS
Negative self-talk can also destroy our relationships. A lot of the time, we cause ourselves unnecessary stress and worry and anger by fighting with mental scarecrows. We have imaginary fights with loved ones in our heads, which increases our blood pressure and reduces the quality of our relationships. When you find yourself fighting with the mental scarecrows, use the rubber-band technique or the anchoring technique from Chapter Two to snap yourself out of the negative mindset.

POWER OF QUESTIONS
As we’ve seen in this short book, questions are very powerful for changing your self-talk. Your questions determine what you focus on. If you want to change your self-talk, change your questions. When you change the quality of your questions, you will change the quality of your life.
AVOIDING ABSOLUTES
Another useful tool for changing your negative self-talk is to question your absolute statements. Absolute statements are usually incorrect. Question the absolute statements that you make to yourself as well as the absolute statements you make to others.

IF-THEN PLANNING
Sometimes our self-talk consists of making plans regarding how we will react if certain situations arise. As we’ve seen, if-then planning is a powerful tool for achieving more success in your life. Instead of unconsciously creating if-then plans that hurt your relationships and your life, consciously create positive if-then plans that help you deal with situations more effectively.

PHYSIOLOGY
Our self-talk affects how we feel, and how we feel is reflected in our physiology. However, according to scientific research, we can change how we feel simply by changing our physiology. If you want to change your self-talk, change your physiology.

PRIMING
Research on priming has revealed that we are unconsciously affected by our environment. If we receive positive stimuli, we will be positive. If we receive negative stimuli, we will be negative. These processes take place on an unconscious level without us even being aware of them. If you want to change your self-talk, change your visual and auditory inputs. Surround yourself with positive messages and engage in positive behaviors, and you’ll not only have more positive conversations with yourself, you’ll also experience a happier, healthier and wealthier life.
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