

# Toolbox: Positive Self-Talk

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There's a conversation that goes on in your head while you're riding, and it doesn't mean you're crazy. Take a look at it. Are you encouraging yourself? Worried? Beating yourself up? Self-talk can have a big effect on cycling performance. Increasing your awareness of negative self-talk and correcting it could become your most important mental skill.

By Marvin Zauderer

Last month, I explored *Goal-Setting* the first of the *five core skills of mentally fit athletes*. This month, we look at Self-Talk in more depth.

I can't climb...I didn't podium, so this race was a waste of time...I rode badly in a century last month, so I'll ride badly in this century today...I'm so nervous, I just know something bad is going to happen...I'm so much weaker than her — I'm really a weak rider...I can't win this race, so why bother finishing? I'm really a lousy climber — I was just lucky today...The team's going to fire me if I keep doing so poorly...I should be a better rider by now.

Any of those sound familiar?

What you say to yourself needs to be directed toward improving your performance, not detracting from it. And if you don't train your self-talk, it can get out of control. Then a challenging situation - being dropped, having a bad day, missing the break - may become insurmountable.

Where does negative self-talk come from? Well, yes, it does come from watching too many Woody Allen movies, but where else? A key source: anxiety. Anxiety - and its cousins: fear, stress, worry, tension, and pressure - tends to fuel negative self-talk, and negative self-talk tends to feed anxiety. There are many ways to manage and reduce anxiety; I'll cover that in more depth in an upcoming article on regulating emotions. But for now, note that you can interrupt the cycle: stop the negative self-talk, and you remove an important source of anxiety's fuel. With less negative self-talk, you'll bum less energy on anxiety, you'll be more focused, and you're likely to have more fun.

## Types of Negative Self-Talk

In the early 1960's, *Aaron Beck*, the father of *cognitive therapy*, researched ways in which our thoughts affect us. He noticed that our minds distort reality at times (no, not those times), and that this can cause negative, unnecessary effects on our feelings and behaviors. He discovered that as we get more objective about situations, sensations, and feelings -what he called "correcting cognitive distortions" -we shift our thinking, and thus our feelings and behavior. Cognitive distortions represent the bulk of most negative self-talk.

Some of the most common cognitive distortions include:

- **All-or-nothing thinking.** Seeing things in absolute, black-and-white terms. You didn't podium, and so you think you wasted your time?
- **Being ruled by "should" and "shouldn't".** You should be a better rider by now? Says who? This kind of self-oppression is sometimes also a sign of perfectionism and all-or-nothing thinking, eg. "I'm no good unless I'm perfect."

- **Jumping to conclusions.** You can't climb? So you've never ridden 100 meters over a 3% grade? You have? How about a 4% grade? A related distortion:
- **Overgeneralizing, where there's insufficient (rather than no) evidence for your conclusion.** You rode badly in a century a month ago, and that's unshakable proof that you'll ride badly in a century today? Hmm. Sometimes this kind of thinking leads to another distortion: Labeling. You say you're a "lousy climber?" Why? Because you've not yet beaten your friends up a 4-mile, 12% grade? Hmm.
- **Magnifying or minimizing.** Catastrophizing — dramatically overestimating the chances of something bad happening, like being thrown off the team — is a common kind of magnification. It tends to promote vigilance for the "worst case." You climbed well today because you were just lucky?" Sounds like you might be minimizing.
- **Focusing completely on the negative.** Just because she's stronger than you (today), you're "really a weak rider?" Are you seeing the whole picture?

"I feel, therefore It Is." Going with your gut" is a good principle, but taking it too far — "emotional reasoning" — can get you in trouble. Yes, you're nervous, but that doesn't mean something bad is going to happen. You may just be nervous.

These patterns of thinking often become habitual. Fortunately, they can be unlearned.

### Correcting Negative Self-Talk

As with most everything within ourselves that we want to have a chance to improve, self-awareness is the key. On your next several rides, tune in to your self-talk. Without removing too much of your attention from the road, other riders, and road kill, pay attention to any bits of conversation you have with yourself.

For some or you, this may come easy. For others or you, self-talk may be difficult to notice at first. Try this: pay attention to your breathing. For thousands of years, meditators from a variety of traditions have found that paying close attention to the breath cultivates increased self-awareness, particularly of thoughts and feelings. Or, try this: notice any feelings that come up while riding, and see if you can remember any thoughts that came up before the feelings.

You may find it helpful to keep a log of your positive and negative self-talk. And, you may find it helpful to tell someone about it - your coach, a friend, your spouse - not necessarily to get their advice, but just as a way of "giving voice" to your self-talk. Sometimes when you hear it aloud, it can help you to be more sensitive to it next time.

You may also find it helpful to investigate what seemed to influence the self-talk. Were you happy, sad, scared, angry, tired, embarrassed, nervous, hungry, confident?

When you become aware of negative self-talk, you can use these techniques:

- **Thought-stopping.** Some people use sheer force of will, some visualize a red light or stop sign. Whatever you use, shut that thought down.
- **Questioning.** When you hear negative self-talk, wait. Ask yourself: What's the evidence for what your mind is saying to you? What's the proof?
- **Reducing your anxiety.** Depending on whether you're on or off the bike, use whatever you find soothing (and legal): breathing, meditation. Imagery, music, being in nature, talking with a friend. You may not become relaxed, but you're likely to become more relaxed, perhaps just enough to

allow another technique to work.

- **Thought-replacement.** Here's your counterattack. What could you say (instead) to yourself that would be encouraging, supportive or motivating, while still believable?
  - Positive, reality-based counterstatements: ("Given my stage of training, I am climbing well.")
  - Affirmations. ("I am strong and have a good team in this race.")
  - Frequently-used cue words with positive associations. ("Calm and focused")
  - Behaviors. ("I'm going to focus on having good form on this climb.")

Sometimes, rather than being able to say something positive to yourself, the best you can do is to say something non-negative. For example, "I'm never going to win" could be replaced with "I'll suspend judgment for the moment on how the race will play out." That could be progress for you. In your training, notice frequent words and phrases of negative self-talk and develop a plan for responding to them. If you're competing, review your plan as part of your pre-race routine.

The mind can be a dangerous thing. But you can use your mind to battle your mind -successfully.

## Positive Self-Talk

One of the most powerful influences on your attitude and personality is what you say to yourself. It is not what happens to you, but how you respond internally to what happens to you, that determines your thoughts, feelings, and your actions. By controlling your inner dialogue, or your "self talk," you can begin to assert control over every part of your life.

Your self-talk determines the majority of your emotional life. The words that you use to describe what is happening to you, and how you feel about external events, will trigger the emotions of happiness or unhappiness that you experience. When you see things positively and you look for the good in every situation and in each person, you will become a very positive and optimistic person. Since the quality of your life is determined by how you feel moment to moment, you should make it a habit to only think and talk about what you want and keep your mind off of what you don't want.

You are constantly faced with challenges, difficulties, and problems every day of your life. They are unavoidable and one of the inevitable parts of being human. But as you draw upon your resources to respond effectively to each challenge, you grow and become a stronger person. When you look back over your life, you'll see that you are the kind of person that you are because of all the difficulties and problems that you have had to overcome in your life. Without those setbacks, you could not have learned what you needed to know to develop the character and strength that you have at this point in your life.

Much of your ability to succeed comes from the way you deal with life. Having a *positive mental attitude* is indispensable for success and happiness. It is the key to success in business, and it is vital to building strong relationships with other people. Everyone wants to be around a positive person with a cheerful attitude towards life. But no one wants to be around a negative person who is always pessimistic about everything. Your ability to develop and maintain a positive mental attitude, no matter what the situation may be, will play a critical role in any success you achieve.

One of the best ways to define a positive mental attitude is having "a constructive and positive response to adversity." It is only when you are confronted with a setback or adversity that you really know if you have a positive attitude or not. Anyone can be positive when things are going well. It is only when things are going against you, that you are able to demonstrate to yourself and others, that you have a positive character and personality.

One of the common characteristics of all high achieving men and women is that they recognize the inevitability of temporary setbacks and disappointments. They accept them as a normal and natural part of their life. They do everything possible to avoid problems, but when they come up, successful people learn from them and rise above them. They *continue* to move forward towards their goals.

Optimistic people develop the habit of talking to themselves in constructive ways. Whenever they experience adversity of any kind, they immediately describe it to themselves in such a way that it loses its ability to trigger negative emotions. They are able to exert a sense of control by how they describe any event or situation to themselves.

There is a natural tendency in all of us to react emotionally when our expectations are frustrated in any way. When something we wanted and hoped for fails to materialize, we feel a temporary sense of disappointment and unhappiness. We feel hurt and disillusioned. We react just as though we had been punched in the “emotional solar plexus.”

A person who is positive and optimistic is resilient and bounces back fast when he or she encounters a problem or setback of any kind. He or she responds quickly to an *adverse event* and interprets it as being temporary and only external. An optimistic person takes full control of his or her inner dialogue and counters any negative feelings by immediately reframing the event so that it appears positive in some way.

Since your mind can hold only one thought at a time, either positive or negative, if you deliberately choose the positive thought to dwell upon; you keep your mind optimistic and your emotions positive. Since your thoughts and feelings determine your actions, if you keep your words and thoughts positive, you will automatically be a more positive person and move more rapidly toward your goals.

It all comes down to the way you talk to yourself on a daily basis. When a problem or difficulty comes up you must learn to change your language from negative to positive. For example, you should learn to use the word situation instead of problem: A problem is something you wrestle and struggle with. It represents a potential loss and difficulty. A situation, on the other hand, is just something that you deal with. The event is the same. But the way you interpret the event to yourself is what makes it sound and appear completely different.

An even better word to substitute for problem is the word challenge. When you are faced with a difficulty of any kind, instead of saying, “I have a problem,” you should say, “I have an interesting challenge facing me.” The word challenge is inherently positive. It is something that you rise to and that makes you stronger. It is again the same situation, only the word that you are using to describe it is different. As a result, your emotional response will be different as well.

The best of all possible words for any event or situation is the word opportunity. When you are faced with a difficulty of any kind, instead of saying, “I have a problem,” you should say, “I am faced with an unexpected opportunity.” Within every difficulty or problem, there lies the seed of an equal or greater opportunity or benefit. If you focus your attention on finding out what the valuable lesson is, you will always find it.

You should start your day in front of a mirror saying affirmations, such as “I like myself,” “I am the best,” and “I can do it.” These are personal and positive affirmations that will build your levels of self confidence and self-esteem. You should say these affirmations out loud in front of a mirror at least 50 times a day. By doing this, you will be driving these new positive thoughts deep into your subconscious. At first when you

do this, you'll feel kind of funny doing it, only because your mind over many years has been programmed with so much negativity that it will take time to reprogram your mind with these new positive affirmations.

The hallmark of the truly successful and happy person is the ability to be objective and unemotional when caught up in the inevitable storms of daily life. The high achieving individual has the ability to continue talking to himself or herself in a positive and optimistic way no matter what the situation is. They are always calm, clear, and completely under control. As a result, they are able to exert a far greater sense of control and influence over their environment, and are less likely to be angry, upset, or distracted by problems or difficulties.

The starting point of becoming a more positive person is to monitor and control your self-talk every minute of the day. Keep your thoughts and words positive and consistent with your goals. Keep your mind focused on what you want and on becoming the person you want to be.

Remember that it is impossible to learn, grow and become successful without adversity and difficulties. You must rise above them in order to become a better person. So, welcome each difficulty as a learning experience and look into the situation to find something good or beneficial in it.

Always, keep your thoughts on your future and on your goals. Constantly think about the person you want to become. When things go wrong temporarily, respond by saying to yourself, "I believe in the perfect outcome of every situation in my life." Resolve to be cheerful and pleasant in every situation. Resist every temptation to respond to a situation negatively. View disappointment as an opportunity to grow stronger, and talk to yourself and others about it in a positive and optimistic way.

When you practice positive self-talk, and keep your words and your mental pictures consistent with your goals, nothing can stop you from being the SUCCESS you are meant to be.

## Believing In Yourself: Developing Positive Self-Talk

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### Positive Self-Talk

Once you become aware of how your self-talk sounds, imagine what a kind, supportive voice would say. Picture a person being encouraging to you. This could be a grandparent, a coach, a favorite teacher or a friend.

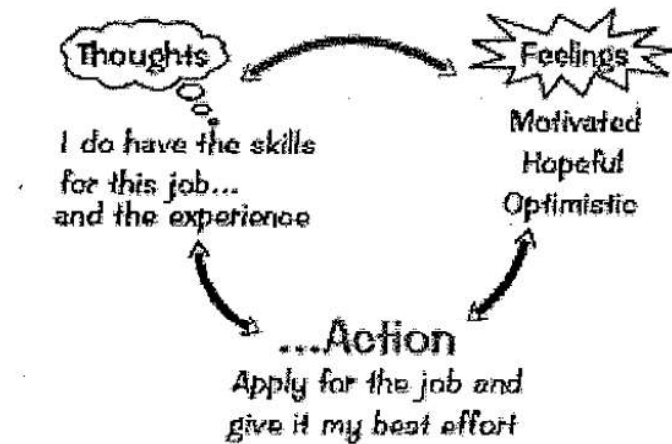
Here's what an encouraging person might say:

- "Go ahead. Give it a try. You do have the skills required to do the job. You deserve the promotion!"
- "You're good!"
- "Good for you! You did very well!"

- What would you think...?
- How would you feel...?
- What would you do...?

## Feelings...Thoughts...Actions...

See the difference positive thoughts make on your feelings...thoughts...and actions!



Ultimately, create your own kind and supportive thoughts. Use positive self-talk and affirmations regularly to affirm your self-image and sense of worth.

Affirmations are positive self-talk statements which:

- Start with "I".
- Are clear and brief.
- Take place in the present.
- Become more effective with repetition.

As a result, actions are more likely to include withdrawing from people and avoiding new situations, or perhaps acting on our hostility with sarcasm or blaming.

## 12 Affirmations

Write down your own affirmations. Here are some examples...

- I deserve to feel good.
- I am healthy and strong.
- I have unique abilities and talents.
- I take care of myself.
- I feel safe and confident.
- I deserve to enjoy time to myself.
- I can make a difference.

- I am a good friend.
- I am willing to take risks to grow and change.
- When something goes wrong, I'll handle it.
- I am a good person, mistakes and all.
- I am worthy and capable.

Do you know about the “P” language? It’s a game children play in school where they use the letter ‘p’ in between all the letters of the word. It’s very difficult at the start but once you get the hang of it, it becomes easy and is a lot of fun to play with.

Success has a ‘p’ language of its own? Do you know it? Add the ‘P’ to each letter of the word and have fun!

- **‘S’ - Plan.** Only when you know where you want to go can you go there and reach it. So first things first, set your goal. Understand the direction you want to start treading. Be specific. Your goal can’t be I want to be happy in life. It has to be concrete like, want to positively touch lives of a million people through my profession and blog and that would make me happy.
- **‘U’ - Passion.** Love what you do because only then can you do it well. If your heart is not there your head can’t support you for too long. Intellectually we can only achieve moderate success but when our heart and soul is in what we do, sky is also not the limit... the universe probably is!
- **‘C’ - Patience.** “Patience is a virtue.” They teach us that in school and we forget all about it the moment we are out of school! We are forever in a hurry to do. Do whatever comes our way as long as we ‘do’! Relax, wait, watch... things will go your way.
- **‘C’ - Persistence.** In the rat race to achieve we forget that the tortoise won the race (remember the fable about the hare and the tortoise). Most of us try to become the hare, have a burnout and sleep. The successful are slow and steady (steady being the key word) Things will not always go as per plan but keep at it. Persistence pays in more ways than one.
- **‘E’ - Praise.** Appreciate your efforts every single small or big step of the way. Most of us only focus at how far we still are from our goal rather than how close we’ve come to it. Imagine if you had to climb a ladder looking only at the top. Chances are you’ll miss a step and fall backwards. Watch your step, focus only on the next step and once you’ve climbed it, smile and tell yourself “good job done”. Before you know it, you’ll be right on top!
- **‘S’ - Positivity.** Keep your mind positive. Read positive literature, hear positive music, watch positive movies, write positive stuff. There is plenty of positive around, find it within and outside of you and use it. When you fill yourself with positivity your environment will automatically begin to become positive and together positive growth will happen.
- **‘S’ - Pray.** Whether you are an atheist or you believe in God, trust the fact that there is an energy unknown to us which supports us. Believe in it and keep the faith. Your trust in yourself and the energy will give you the strength to plan, be passionate, patient, persistent, praise worthy and positive.

So go ahead and bring your childhood back. Play the game of *SpUpCpCpEpSpSp*. You’ll come out a winner for sure!