



Self Talk

What You Tell Yourself Matters

Self Talk - What You Tell Yourself Matters teaches you ways to fight negative thinking. The thoughts that you have during recovery from a traumatic event are very important to your recovery. We give you tips for learning positive "self-talk," to limit negative thinking and focus on positives.

Introduction

The focus of these books is to help empower people to cope more effectively with traumatic life events. These e-books are built from solid scientific evidence. This evidence has shown that when people know what to expect, and learn ways to deal with the demands of recovering, they are able to more effectively manage traumatic stress and find ways to grow personally from the experience. It is also true that everyone has a limit, so it is critical to know what the signs are that point to being completely “upside down” when dealing with trauma and when to seek outside support or professional help.

The books in this series are *The Way Ahead, How to Get Support During Recovery, What You Tell Yourself Matters, Coping With Trauma Reminders, What Not to Do!, Getting Professional Help: Step by Step*, and *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress*.

This book will help you to fight negative thinking during your recovery. We hope you find it helpful.

Table of Contents

The Way Ahead	3
Self –Talk	3
Making Sense of a Traumatic Experience	3
Changed Beliefs.....	4
Self-Talk Matters!.....	4
Self-Talk and Recovery from Trauma.....	4
Is it Wrong to Think This Way?	5
Beliefs and Judgments are Not the Same Things as "Facts"	5
The Connection between Thoughts and Feelings.	6
Negative Beliefs about Stress Reactions.....	7
Understanding Body Sensations.	8
Counter-arguments are Important.	9
Useful Counter-Arguments.....	9
Summary.....	9
Negative Thinking Patterns.....	9
Eight Patterns to Avoid.	10
List of Challenging Questions.....	12
Guilt, Shame, and Thinking Patterns	16
Thinking Patterns that Cause Feelings of Guilt.....	16
Identifying Your Personal Negative Self-Talk.....	18
Negative Trauma-Related Beliefs	19
Developing and Practicing Your Personal "Counter-Arguments"	20
Useful Counter-Arguments	20
Remember!	21
Keeping a Self-Talk Record.....	21
Summary	22

The Way Ahead

This book is designed for one thing and one thing only—as a practical guide to help you cope more effectively with an experience that has deeply affected your life, possibly turning it upside down. There is a series of seven books, each with its own focus on different aspects of trauma recovery. Each book is a “pick up and go” workbook with specific exercises and tools to help you help yourself. I will be extremely practical and direct in this book. When people face life’s unpredictable tragedies, we have found that they do not have time for idle chat or psychobabble, so we have tried to be as direct and focused on skills that will aid in recovery.

Healing and recovery is a process. Understanding this process is vital and can help you gain a sense of control. The recovery process has four main parts including learning new information about trauma and trauma recovery, gaining important skills to help in the recovery process, understanding the importance of setting realistic and clear recovery goals, and finally, learning how to reward yourself to help you move forward. We now turn to the issue of “self-talk” or the thoughts you have are important in how you recover.

Self –Talk

This book focuses on helping you to fight negative thinking. There is a lot of material here that we think will be very useful for you. We have broken the book into six mini-sections to make it easier for you to “digest” the information. You should take as much time as you'd like to work through each section.

The mini-sections are:

- Making Sense of a Traumatic Experience
- Negative Beliefs about Stress Reactions
- Negative Thinking Patterns
- List of Challenging Questions
- Guilt, Shame, and Thinking Patterns
- Identifying Your Personal Negative Self-Talk
- Developing and Practicing Your Personal "Counterarguments"

Making Sense of a Traumatic Experience

When a person experiences a trauma, he or she faces significant “coping challenges.” These challenges include coping with memories of what happened, coping with unfamiliar or frightening stress reactions, dealing with the continuing effects of the experience, and facing problems that result from it. As a part of the coping process, most people spend a lot of time thinking about the experience: what happened, why it happened, what it means about



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who you are, what it means for your future. Trying to make sense of what happened is part of the natural human response to trauma.

Changed Beliefs. Our beliefs change because of thinking about what happened and what it means, we often make interpretations, form judgments, and come to conclusions, about ourselves, about our behavior during and after the trauma, about the causes of what happened, and about the future. We also may re-think our beliefs about other people. In fact, traumatic events can have a profound effect on how we view the world and our place in it. These can undermine our confidence in ourselves, change our view of others, cause us to worry about the future, and challenge our beliefs.

For some, traumatic events eventually result in positive changes. Some trauma survivors report that they are now more aware of what is truly important in life, that they remember to cherish their loved ones, or that their daily life has taken on greater meaning.



Self-Talk Matters!

How you think—what you say to yourself about what happened—will have important effects on where you go from here. Your judgments and beliefs about the trauma and its effects will influence your mood and emotions, how you cope with your challenges, how you deal with the people around you, and how effectively you build your life after trauma.

We have designed this section to help you make sense of what happened and talk to yourself in a way that strengthens you, helps you remain positive, and keeps you focused on the path forward. It also should alert you to the kind of thinking mistakes that many trauma survivors make to help you avoid them.

Self-Talk and Recovery from Trauma. We are always talking to ourselves. We constantly think about what is happening, about ourselves, and about the future. This constant stream of self-talk is automatic. We can't stop it from happening, and sometimes we don't even notice that it is happening.

When a trauma happens, it can powerfully affect your patterns of self-talk. As noted earlier, it is normal to think a lot about what happened, why it happened, what it means about you and about the future. As a result of this process of reflection, many trauma survivors find themselves having distressing negative self-talk that can make them feel worse, not better. Instead of keeping you calm and focused on your recovery, negative self-talk can increase feelings of fear, depression, or anger.

Of course, trauma survivors have some positive thoughts as well, thoughts that can increase their sense of control and their sense that they are able to cope. For example, thoughts like "I've come through other things, I can come through this too," or "Things will get better with time," or "I've just got to take things slowly, one day at a time."

It is important for you to become more aware of your automatic thoughts and to replace negative thoughts with a more positive way of thinking that will help you recover.

Is it Wrong to Think This Way? Focusing on what you are saying to yourself does not mean that you are wrong to think in any particular way. Your beliefs do make sense because in terms of what has happened to you. Our goal is to help you to look at how you're thinking (not what you are thinking) and work towards helping you to think in ways that help you soothe yourself, feel more positive, and stay on course as you work towards recovery.

You should know that what people think about their traumatic experience changes over time. Thoughts are not permanent, and what you are thinking now may be different in a week or a month. Sometimes it helps to remember that your reactions are not fixed now and forever.

Beliefs and Judgments are Not the Same Things as "Facts". Shaking negative beliefs connected with traumatic experiences can be hard to do, but with practice, you can start to see them as thoughts and beliefs rather than facts. It may be possible for you to rethink your upsetting beliefs in ways that are helpful to you.

Your thoughts and beliefs about what happened and how it will affect your life are just that: thoughts and beliefs. They are judgments or interpretations about what happened, not "facts."

The primary purpose of this section is to help you do just that—rethink those upsetting beliefs and replace any negative self-talk with self-talk that helps you feel stronger and more in control of your recovery.

For example, after a trauma most people find that they have trouble controlling their emotions or physical reactions (see the books *Coping With Trauma Reminders* and *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress* for more help with this). They find themselves having uncontrollable, upsetting, and unwanted memories of what happened. Because of this, they often wonder, "Am I going crazy?" This is a thought or belief, not a fact. It is not a fact that you're going crazy. There is nothing crazy about having uncontrollable distress and upsetting thoughts after trauma. These thoughts happen to almost everyone and are not signs of mental illness.

Sometimes people believe that because they have trouble coping with trauma they are weak. Here again, this is a judgment, not a fact. Many strong, competent people have lots of very troubling reactions to the stress that comes from a traumatic event. The more you tell yourself that you're crazy or weak, the more upsetting your reactions to the experience become. In reverse, if you tell yourself that these reactions are a normal part of getting over a trauma,



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and that you can learn ways to help yourself cope with these reactions, you will feel less distress.

The Connection between Thoughts and Feelings. Consider two people, John and Donna, both of whom are experiencing uncontrollable images and memories of their trauma. John says to himself, "There is something wrong with me, I'm going crazy, and I'll never recover from this." Donna, faced with the same reactions, says, "I know that these reactions are common after trauma and usually fade with time. Most people recover and I can, too." You can see that these two ways of thinking will like lead these people to feel very different. John may become even more distressed, while Donna is likely to remain calmer when faced with images and memories.

John, thinking that his reactions are abnormal and a sign of illness, may feel ashamed or afraid to talk to others about what is happening to him. Or, he may feel driven to avoid his memories at all costs, by trying to drown them in alcohol or with drugs.

Try thinking of this in the "ABC Way." A is the Activating situation, B is for Beliefs, and C stands for Consequences related to the beliefs.

A-B-C for John

<u>A</u>ctivating Event	<u>B</u>elief(s)	<u>C</u>onsequence(s)
Experiencing a memory of the trauma (his heart may be pounding.)	"There is something wrong with me."	More fear. More shame.
	"I'm mentally ill."	More hopelessness. Less sharing with others.
	"I'll never recover."	More alcohol or drug use.

Think about John's reactions. Because he is having intrusive thoughts about his trauma, he is thinking that there must be something wrong with him, that he's mentally ill, and that he will never recover. What effects do you think these thoughts will have on his emotions and actions?



In this example, we can see that an "activating event" like having an upsetting intrusive memory about the trauma, does not lead directly to emotional distress. Actually, the activating event leads to a judgment or a belief about the situation. This is also known as self-talk. For John, the belief is that "there's something wrong with me, I'm mentally ill, I'll never recover from this." The emotional consequence of this belief or judgment is John's increasing feelings of fear, shame, and hopelessness. The behavioral consequence for John is that he now shares less with others about his feelings and thoughts, spends less time with family and friends, and possibly drinks more or uses drugs to reduce his feelings of fear and shame.

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Common Reactions to Trauma

- Feelings of intense fear or panic
- Nightmares
- Depression
- Emotional numbness

Common Physical Responses

- Rapid heartbeat
- Rapid breathing
- Physical pain
- Headaches

The “activating event” is having the memory, maybe because something reminds John of his trauma. This activating event leads John to have negative beliefs or self-talk. He says to himself, "There must be something wrong with me, I'm mentally sick, I'll never get better." These beliefs cause negative consequences. Some are emotional consequences, such as feeling worse, feeling afraid, feeling hopeless, and feeling ashamed. Some are action consequences, such as not telling others about personal thoughts and feelings, or withdrawing from others, or drinking alcohol or using drugs as a way of coping. A is the Activating event, B stands for Belief, and C means Consequence (consequences for emotions and for actions). *A leads to B leads to C.*

Here is the ABC diagram for Donna, who has more calming self-talk.

A-B-C for Donna

<u>A</u> ctivating Event	<u>B</u> elief(s)	<u>C</u> onsequence(s)
Experiencing a memory of the trauma (her heart may be pounding.)	"There is nothing wrong with me." "Lots of people have reactions like this after a trauma." "These reactions will gradually go away."	Less fear. Less shame. More hopeful. Resumes social activity. Practices relaxing.

Negative Beliefs about Stress Reactions

Let's focus some more on this topic of negative self-talk. There are many common reactions that people have after a painful or traumatic event. Common responses are listed below. Although these reactions and sensations are common, they naturally cause concern and may seem very strange or upsetting to a person who has never encountered them before.

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If you think carefully, you will notice that there are two different steps in this process. There is the reaction or sensation itself. Then there are the thoughts or beliefs about what these reactions and sensations mean—the interpretations of the reactions. For example, after a traumatic experience, it is common to experience a rapid heartbeat when reminded of something frightening that happened. Interpretations of what

those rapid heartbeats mean can vary a lot, from "I'm going to have a heart attack," to "I must be going crazy," to "Other people tell me that this is normal and not dangerous."

Negative interpretations of your trauma reactions can worsen the distress you feel and make you feel worse about yourself. When you change these interpretations, some of the upsetting feelings may go away—or at least decrease—and you can gain confidence in your ability to cope. When you remember that most of what you are going through is to be expected and will often decrease over time, you will start to feel a little better.

Sometimes, you will find yourself reacting emotionally to what are very small things. You might be watching something on TV and react by becoming very upset and crying. Or, somebody might say something insensitive that normally would roll right off your back, but now you react very strongly. These types of reactions can be alarming. You might feel upset at yourself for being so worked up. You may start to think that you are very fragile. Remember that these kinds of emotional reactions are very common. They usually lessen after a period of weeks or a few months and go away naturally. If they haven't greatly decreased in three or four months after your trauma, you should consider talking to a trauma counselor. Refer to *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step*.

Remember, too, there are times we cope well but don't notice! Most of the time, we notice when we feel upset or negative and ignore the times when we deal with something in a positive way. Try to pay attention to things that you are doing that are positive—like spending time writing about your trauma recovery experiences, talking to a friend, practicing relaxation techniques, or resuming some social activity.

Understanding Body Sensations. When something happens to remind us of trauma, we respond with bodily changes (e.g., fast heart beat, rapid breathing) like those responses that occurred during the trauma itself. This is a normal reaction. If you have significant, physical reactions that continue after your traumatic experience, you should realize that these reactions are part of an ordinary fear response. Usually, these responses are normal and do not indicate that anything is wrong.

Will Something Bad Happen Again?

After a trauma, most people worry that their stress reaction—feeling nervous or anxious—means that something bad will happen. This judgment should be changed to “this does not mean that bad things are going to happen. It means that I’m dealing with a significant trauma.”

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Counter-arguments are Important. If you find yourself thinking that your reactions mean that there is something wrong with you, or that you're going crazy, it is important that you have things that you can say to yourself to dispute your negative thoughts and keep yourself calm and positive. In order to challenge your thoughts successfully, it will be helpful if you have thought about some responses that you can use. The next sections will show you some possible counterarguments to use, and at the end of this book are some useful ideas for practicing your personal counter-arguments.

Useful Counter-Arguments. These reactions are common and usually go away or at least happen less.

- Many trauma survivors have reactions much like mine.
- My reactions are sometimes upsetting, but they are not dangerous.
- I am not going crazy.
- I don't need to be afraid of my reactions.
- I am not sick; my body is just reacting as if I am still in danger, even though I am not.
- I've been to the doctor; there is nothing wrong with my heart.
- My heart beats at least this much when I exercise, so I don't need to worry.
- Breathing fast isn't dangerous; I can slow down my breathing.
- I don't need to feel embarrassed about having such strong reactions.

This, too, shall pass. If you have been worrying about your stress reactions, take a minute to review all the thoughts listed here and decide which ones you can use the next time you feel a stress response occurring.

Summary. One thought that frequently comes up after a traumatic event is the belief that something bad will happen if you experience strong negative feelings. Sometimes, trauma survivors believe that their physical reactions are dangerous, that they're going to have a heart attack or die. Of course, if you have a serious heart condition, you should work with your doctor to manage your physical reactions to trauma. But, traumatic stress reactions are not dangerous for the vast majority of people. Knowing that the reaction that you are having is a normal result of having a trauma is often enough to calm some of your fears.



Negative Thinking Patterns

In this section, we will consider some common negative thinking patterns that are common in trauma survivors. Understanding these patterns will help you to see if you are experiencing some of the same patterns. In fact, many negative thinking patterns are common in all of us, but especially common after a traumatic experience.

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Eight Patterns to Avoid. There are many thinking patterns that are common when a person undergoes a traumatic event. These patterns may lead to more negative emotions such as depression, anger, guilt and shame, or fear. These thinking patterns are common in all of us. They are based on “thinking mistakes” or errors. Learning about these thinking patterns can help you to avoid falling into the habit of thinking this way.

Take a minute to read over this list of negative thinking patterns. Which patterns of thinking do you think you might follow?

Negative Thinking Patterns

- **Jumping to Conclusions:** Drawing conclusions when evidence is lacking or even contradictory.
- **Exaggerating or Minimizing:** Exaggerating or minimizing the meaning of an event by blowing things way out of proportion or shrinking their importance inappropriately.
- **“Catastrophizing”:** Focusing on the most negative things that could possibly happen.
- **Disregarding:** Disregarding important aspects of a situation.
- **Oversimplifying:** Labeling events or beliefs as good/bad or right/wrong.
- **Over-generalizing:** Over-generalizing from a single incident, viewing a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
- **Mind reading:** Assuming that people are thinking negatively of you when there is no definite evidence of this.
- **Emotional reasoning:** Reasoning from how you feel.



Drawing Conclusions When Evidence Just Isn't There! Having repeated thoughts about a trauma, images, and memories are very common following trauma and are not evidence of mental illness. Traumatic events don't cause people to lose their minds or go crazy. Most people who have experienced a trauma realize that they are thinking and feeling differently than before the trauma, but not that it is evidence of having a mental illness.

Exaggerating or Minimizing the Meaning of an Event. Imagine a person who is mugged at gunpoint and hit over the head in the process. If that person says to himself, "I am a coward," because he did not put up a fight, he is exaggerating the meaning of not having resisted. He is also minimizing the importance of the fact that the assailant had a gun. Much negative self-talk is not wrong, but it may be exaggerated. Look for signs that you might be exaggerating the negative or minimizing positives as you go through your recovery.

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"Catastrophizing". People who have experienced trauma may only see negative things happening in the future. In fact, most people do recover from trauma. While it is natural to be unsure about what will happen, it is a thinking mistake to focus on the most negative possible effect.

Disregarding Important Aspects of a Situation. This negative thinking pattern is especially common among people who blame themselves for what happened during a traumatic experience. For example, someone who blames herself for not yelling for help during an attack may be forgetting that yelling might have caused the attacker to become more violent. Or, consider a soldier who blames himself for shooting a civilian suspected of being the enemy. This soldier might be disregarding the fact that if he had not shot the person and the person had turned out to be an enemy combatant others could have died. After a trauma has happened, it is easy to focus on something bad that happened, or a decision that seems wrong looking back. By doing this, we forget about other parts of the situation that could help to explain our actions and behaviors. It is also easy to forget that in extreme situations, we react the best way we can.

Oversimplifying Events or Beliefs. Beliefs like "I was wrong not to report my sexual assault," or "I was wrong to fight in the war," or "I was wrong to open the door to a stranger," are all examples of looking at a decision that may have been reasonable in many ways and oversimplifying it as wrong or bad. These decisions were complicated and were affected by many factors. They are not simply good or bad, right or wrong. Calling them bad or wrong only increases our negative emotions and causes us to forget about how complicated the situation might have been. It is important to realize and remember that we did the best we could do given our circumstances.

Over-generalizing from a Single Incident. Imagine a person who was unable to prevent himself/herself from being attacked. If he/she now believes "I can't protect myself from harm," or "I can't recognize dangerous situations," then that is over-generalizing. It is more accurate to say, "In that situation I couldn't protect myself," or "I didn't recognize that it was a dangerous situation that night. The fact that something happened does not mean it will go on happening. No one can accurately predict what will happen and all people find themselves in situations that cannot be controlled. This doesn't mean that they lack good judgment, are unable to make good decisions, or that they will never be able to control future situations."

Mind Reading. Imagine a victim of a sexual assault telling himself or herself that "other people will think I'm (fill in the blank: unattractive, damaged goods, messed up, mentally ill, weird, different from them)." When in the company of others, this person might think these things. Or, he or she may avoid being around other people at all because of "mind reading." Mind reading means you are assuming—without good



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evidence—that other people are thinking the worst about you. It is more helpful to ask, "Do I really have good evidence about what others are thinking about me?" and to remember "People usually want to support those who have been through a trauma," and "I can check out what others are thinking by asking them."

Emotional Reasoning. Reasoning from How You Feel Imagine that you are having anxiety reactions in which you feel afraid, your heart feels like it's going to jump out of your chest and you feel dizzy or sick to your stomach. When you are feeling afraid like this, it might be easy to say to yourself, "The world is a really dangerous place." A more helpful question would be, "Am I letting my emotions get in the way of thinking clearly?" or "Do I have good evidence that this is true?" You might remind yourself that, "I will probably think about this differently when I'm calmer." You could also say to yourself, "I went through a serious experience and it is reasonable that I feel this way. It doesn't mean everything is dangerous now."

Understanding “thinking mistakes” and negative thought patterns will help you to pay attention to what you are saying to yourself and consider whether you are falling into any of these patterns.

List of Challenging Questions

In addition to recognizing your common negative thinking patterns, it is important that you begin to think about challenging your own negative thinking. This can be hard to do at first. Here is a list of questions that you can ask yourself to help challenge your negative beliefs. Which questions are important for you? Check the ones that seem to be important for you.



- What is the evidence for or against this idea?
- Am I confusing a habit with a fact?
- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?
- Am I using words or phrases that are extreme or exaggerated? For example:
 - Always
 - Forever
 - Every time
 - Never
 - Must
 - Can't
- Is the source of information reliable?
- Am I thinking in terms of certainties instead of probabilities, and am I confusing a low probability with a high probability?
- Are my judgments based on feelings rather than facts?

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- Am I overestimating how much control I had during my trauma experience?
- What would I say to someone else who had this thought?

What is the Evidence for or against this Idea? When you are afraid, angry, or ashamed, it is very easy to jump to conclusions. By asking yourself, "What's the evidence," you can remind yourself to pay attention to what you are saying. And, you can start to evaluate your self-talk in terms of whether there is good evidence for what you're thinking.

Are you confusing a Habit with a Fact? Consider the person who has developed a habit of avoiding almost everything—conversations, places, people, activities—that reminds him of his traumatic experience. He might begin saying to himself, "I can't get over this," or "I can't handle what happened," or "I'm a weak person." He makes these judgments about himself and uses his habit of avoiding reminders as evidence that his judgments are true.



If he began to tell himself, "I have survived a serious trauma," and "I'm actually getting through this, it's just going to take time," he might begin to feel stronger and more in control.

Are you thinking in All-or-None Terms? You are not either perfect at things or completely incompetent at them. We are all somewhere in between. The future too, is neither perfect nor terrible, but somewhere in between. All-or-nothing thinking fails to recognize this and sets us up for negative thoughts that lead to depression and shame. To catch this way of thinking, you should ask, "Am I thinking in all-or-none terms?"

When a traumatic event happens, it is easy to begin to say, "I can't rely on myself." Instead of thinking, "I can protect myself," or "I have good instincts about danger," a person can move to the opposite beliefs like, "I can't protect myself at all," or "I can't trust myself or my instincts." The ability to take care of yourself or the ability to recognize a risky situation is not all-or-nothing.

Words we use to exaggerate

- Always
- Forever
- Never
- Need
- Should
- Must
- Can't
- Every time

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Are you using Words or Phrases that are extreme or exaggerated? These words—always, never, should, must, and so on—are signs of extreme or exaggerated beliefs. Thinking, "I can never do anything right," is a lot more negative than saying, "I made a mistake," or "I messed up that situation." Believing, "I should have gotten over my trauma by now," means more than, "I'm disappointed that I still am having these feelings," it also includes the thought that, "If I haven't gotten over it yet, that means there's something bad or wrong with me." Anytime you find yourself using these words, be alert that you are being extreme in your thinking or exaggerating something. Ask yourself, "Am I exaggerating?" may help you change what you are saying.

Is the Source of Information Reliable? A traumatic event is something unfamiliar to most of us. To help make sense of what happened and what will happen, you should seek information from a reliable source. Not only do we ask questions of our doctor, or read to gather information, we also talk to others around us about what happened. Other people around us express their opinions, give advice, and pass on information. Some of this information and opinion can be upsetting, make us angry, make us hopeless, and make us more afraid. But, are our sources of information reliable? Do they know what they are talking about?



Especially after a traumatic event—which is something that most of us rarely experience—we seek information. We ask questions of our doctor, maybe we read something to gather information. But, we also talk to others around us about what happened, and they express their opinions, give advice, pass on information that they have. However, many people around us may be mistaken in what they say. They may not understand what we have been through, have prejudices of their own, be uninformed, or be too upset themselves to think carefully. Few of them are likely to be experts in traumatic stress.

When you are upset or worried about something someone else does or tells you, consider the source of information. Is the person knowledgeable and interested in your welfare? Or, are they, perhaps, making the same kinds of "thinking mistakes" that you have learned about?

Are You Thinking in Terms of Certainties Instead of Probabilities? No one can read the future. Therefore, it is not possible to be certain about what will happen, and not fair to yourself to think in terms of certainties about what will happen. Many things are possible, good as well as bad. When a trauma survivor thinks, "I will not be able to go back to work," or "I know my partner/family/parents will blame me for this," it is more accurate to say, "I may not be able to return to my job as it was "or" It's possible that I may be blamed by someone for what happened."

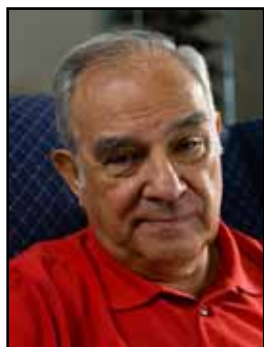
Are You Confusing a Low Probability with a High Probability? Because something bad has happened, trauma survivors recognize that they are vulnerable. This recognition can easily turn into a belief that another attack, disaster, or accident is highly likely. In fact, these things have a low probability of happening.

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Sometimes after a trauma, a person feels that the world is a very dangerous place or that they will be attacked again, and begins to stay inside more and retreat from the world. In fact, the probability of being attacked again or having another car accident, or being in another disaster is very unlikely, with a low probability of happening. Try asking yourself, "Am I confusing a low probability with a high probability?"

Are Your Judgments Based on Feelings Rather than Facts? Very strong feelings—of fear, anger, or sadness—may lead to negative thoughts. Often, these thoughts are not accurate or factual, because they are created out of strong feelings instead of facts. Imagine that you have tried to talk to someone close to you about what happened, but they don't understand and say something to make you feel bad about yourself. As a result, you feel betrayed and very angry. Feeling this way, it may be easy to think, "Nobody cares about me," or "I can't trust people." Similarly, very strong feelings of fear or sadness may lead to negative thoughts that are really not accurate or factual, but created out of strong feelings instead.

Are You Overestimating How Much Control you had in the Trauma Situation? Many trauma survivors criticize themselves harshly for how they behaved—what they did or didn't do—during their trauma experience. Sometimes, this may happen because they forget how little control they really had at the time. People experiencing a traumatic event usually don't expect what is going to happen, don't have time to gather information, and don't have time to consider different possibilities for action. Really, they don't have the ability at the time to prevent the trauma from happening (otherwise, they would have done so). It is easy, looking back, to think you had more control than you really did.



It will be helpful for you to focus on things you do have control over today, right now. For example, you can gain skills for managing distressing thoughts or images that pop into your mind. Taking action to help yourself can give you more of a sense of control over your recovery.

What Would You Say to Someone Else? We are often better at helping someone else see things differently than we are at helping ourselves to do this. When you ask yourself this question, you often find that you can come up with some good advice that would help another person challenge his or her negative self-talk, and that can help you challenge what you say to yourself. *Challenging Questions Summary* Here is the list of questions again. By learning to ask yourself these questions, you can begin to challenge your negative thinking and self-talk in ways that will help your emotions and hasten your recovery. If you copy them and post them somewhere, you will see them every day (like on the bathroom mirror or refrigerator). That way, you can get in the habit of catching and challenging your negative self-talk.

- What is the evidence for or against this idea?
- Am I confusing a habit with a fact?
- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?
- Am I using words or phrases that are extreme or exaggerated?
- Is the source of information reliable?

✦ *What you Tell Yourself Matters* ✦

- Am I thinking in terms of certainties instead of probabilities, and am I confusing a low probability with a high probability?
- Are my judgments based on feelings rather than facts?
- Am I overestimating how much control I had during my trauma experience?
- What would I say to someone else who had this thought?

Guilt, Shame, and Thinking Patterns

Now we will focus on thinking patterns related to feelings of guilt, which are very common among trauma survivors and sometimes very difficult to recognize as beliefs or interpretations, not facts. Many, many trauma survivors are troubled by beliefs that they are guilty in some way, about what they did or did not do during and after the trauma, for failing in some way, or for surviving when others did not. Similar to the common negative thinking patterns we covered earlier, some common thinking patterns help explain why so many trauma survivors feel guilty.

Thinking Patterns that Cause Feelings of Guilt. Read this list carefully and consider whether you follow any of these thinking patterns. Which thinking patterns might you be using that increase feelings of guilt? Check the ones that seem to apply to you. If you have been struggling with feelings of guilt, you might want to copy this list and look at it regularly to make yourself more aware of these negative thought patterns.

- Remembering now what you did not know at the time, or "20-20 hindsight."
- Forgetting that split-second decisions do not allow you to make careful choices.
- Focusing only on good things that might have happened if you had acted differently.
- Forgetting what you thought was likely to happen when you decided what to do.
- Forgetting that acting on "hunches" or "intuition" rarely pays off; they don't reliably predict what will happen.
- Forgetting about or downplaying the many, many influences that combine to cause a specific traumatic event.
- Failing to recognize that emotional reactions in a traumatic situation are not under voluntary control.
- Forgetting that when all choices will have bad consequences, the least bad choice is highly moral or wise.



20-20 Hindsight. Human beings often think differently when looking back at what happened in hindsight. Looking back and knowing what we know now, we would have done things very differently. When looking back, we have more time to consider possibilities, and most important, we know exactly what happened. It is easy to identify what we should have done

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differently at various times, because we know which actions led to which consequences. It is human nature to go back and think through what happened. But, if we judge ourselves harshly looking back, this isn't fair, because we have much more information now, information we could never have had at the time.

Split-Second Decisions Don't Allow Careful Consideration of Choices. Looking back on what happened it is easy to forget that you may have had only seconds in which to make a decision about what to do. Under these conditions, there is no time to think carefully about the possibilities or to consider the pros and cons of different choices. In fact, sometimes not deciding is worse than making an imperfect decision. Under conditions where there is no time to decide and lots of stress, it is not possible to make "best" decisions.

Focusing Only on Good Things that Might Have Happened if You Had Acted Differently. Focusing only on good possibilities is not accurate in terms of "what might have happened" if you had acted differently in your traumatic situation. This kind of thinking helps to increase your guilt as you lose sight of what may have been wise about your choices. If you had acted differently, things may have gone better, but things may also have gone worse or remained the same.



Forgetting What You Thought was Likely to Happen Sometimes, when we look back in time, we forget what was going through our minds at the time of the original traumatic event. This is natural, because human beings have many, many thoughts and cannot remember most of them, especially those that occur rapidly during times of stress. This means that trauma survivors may not remember what they were thinking during

the situation, what they thought was going to happen.

Often, when trauma survivors do remember what they were thinking, their actions begin to make good sense. They realize that their actions were a sensible choice given what was going through their heads at the time. And, all of us can only act on what we know at the time, not what we find out later.

Acting on "Hunches" or "Intuition" Rarely Pays Off. Sometimes, looking back, trauma survivors beat themselves up for not having listened to their intuition that the situation might be bad, or for not acting on a hunch. However, we do this as human beings because most hunches or intuitions turn out to be false. We disregard fleeting thoughts all the time, which is the right thing to do because these thoughts usually do not turn out to predict what is going to happen.

Forgetting that Many Influences Cause a Specific Traumatic Event. Sometimes a survivor of trauma concludes it was his fault, and that he is really completely to blame for what happened. But, most events, including traumatic ones, are caused by a combination of things. Certainly, the behavior of the victim is a factor. But, so are many other things, like the personalities and behaviors of others who were involved, or the conditions in which the event took place, or the

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circumstances that created the situation in the first place. Finally, chance also is a factor. A survivor is never completely to blame.

Emotional Reactions are not Under Voluntary Control People often feel guilty or ashamed about their emotional reactions during a trauma. They may be ashamed of feeling panicky, of running away, of freezing, of shaking, or crying. They did not expect to react that way. Human beings cannot control their emotions voluntarily, like turning a faucet on and off, especially in a unique situation that may be life threatening. Many courageous individuals react at times with extreme distressing emotions. For example, soldiers under fire may react with terror, freezing, or intense fear in one situation, only to react differently in another.

When all Choices Will Have Bad Consequences, the Least Bad Choice is highly Moral or Wise.

There are situations in which any decision or choice will lead to something bad. Imagine a police officer faced with shooting at an attacker in a crowd and causing the death of a civilian. Had the officer not tried to shoot the attacker, others may have been killed. Or, imagine a person who is sexually assaulted not fighting off the attackers. If she had tried to fight, she probably would have been more seriously injured. When there is no good choice, the least bad choice is a moral one and often a wise one.

Identifying Your Personal Negative Self-Talk



In this section, we will help you identify some of your own negative beliefs. This is an important step in becoming more aware of them and challenging them. Then, we'll help you to develop other beliefs that challenge your negative ones. We call these "counter-arguments." Finally, we'll encourage you to practice your new pattern of self-talk out there in your life, where it counts.

Let's consider you and your own personal thinking. In order for you to reduce any negative self-talk, you should identify what you say to yourself.

Take a minute to ask yourself:

- "How has the trauma changed my views of other people, the world, and me?"
- What thoughts am I having about the trauma?
- About the stress reactions?
- About myself now that this has happened to me?
- About other people in light of what has happened?"

Use the following table to "rate" your level of negative beliefs. Then, as you are going through the next sections, try to focus your counter-arguments on those beliefs that you gave the highest scores to—these are the beliefs you have that are the MOST negative. If this is too difficult right now, then look through the list and find one statement you rate as a 5 or higher. Perhaps you could begin to practice changing that belief first. Then, move on to another.

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Negative Trauma-Related Beliefs

Please indicate by circling the number, how much you agree with the statements below using the following scale:

1=Totally disagree 2=Disagree very much 3=Disagree slightly 4=Neutral 5=Agree slightly 6=Agree very much 7=Totally agree

	Disagree-----Agree						
1. The event happened because of the way I acted.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I can't trust that I will do the right thing.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I am a weak person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I will not be able to control my anger and will do something terrible.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I can't deal with even the slightest upset.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I used to be a happy person but now I am always miserable.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. People can't be trusted.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I have to be on guard all the time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I feel dead inside.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. You can never know who will harm you	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. I have to be especially careful because you never know what can happen next.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I am inadequate.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I will not be able to control my emotions, and something terrible will happen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. If I think about the event, I will not be able to handle it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. The event happened to me because of the sort of person I am.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. My reactions since the event mean that I am going crazy.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. I will never be able to feel normal emotions again.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. The world is a dangerous place.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. Somebody else would have stopped the event from happening.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. I have permanently changed for the worse.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. I feel like an object, not like a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. Somebody else would not have gotten into this situation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. I can't rely on other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. I feel isolated and set apart from others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. I have no future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. I can't stop bad things from happening to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. People are not what they seem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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	Disagree-----Agree						
28. My life has been destroyed by the trauma.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29. There is something wrong with me as a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30. My reactions since the event show that I am a lousy person at coping.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31. There is something about me that made this happen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
32. I will not be able to tolerate my thoughts about the event, and I will fall apart.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
33. I feel like I don't know myself anymore.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
34. You never know when something terrible will happen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
35. I can't rely on myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
36. Nothing good can happen to me anymore.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Developing and Practicing Your Personal "Counter-Arguments"

It will be helpful if, when you say something negative to yourself, you're able to come up with good counterarguments (other ways of looking at the situation) that help you to challenge your distressing beliefs. In order to do this, you need to develop your counterarguments ahead of time. We hope that the previous sections on common negative thinking patterns and questions to ask yourself about your beliefs have helped you to see how to rethink or dispute some of your negative self-talk.

Useful Counter-Arguments

1. These reactions are common and usually go away or at least happen less.
2. Many trauma survivors have reactions much like mine.
3. My reactions are sometimes upsetting, but they are not dangerous.
 - I am not going crazy.
 - I don't need to be afraid of my reactions.
 - I am not sick; my body is just reacting as if I am still in danger, even though I am not.
 - I've been to the doctor; there is nothing wrong with my heart.
 - My heart beats at least this much when I exercise, so I don't need to worry.
 - Breathing fast isn't dangerous; I can slow down my breathing.
 - I don't need to feel embarrassed about having such strong reactions.
 - This, too, shall pass.

Practicing Challenging Your Self-Talk. It is important to notice what you are saying to yourself and remember to challenge your negative self-talk. This skill takes practice. To help you become better at this, use your list of counter-arguments to help you view things differently. It helps if

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you post your list on the bathroom mirror and review them each day—that way you will be prepared.

One way of noticing what you are saying to yourself is to get in the habit of asking yourself one question EVERY time you get upset, afraid, angry, or depressed. The question to ask is, "What am I saying to myself?" The answer to this question can help you to identify what you are thinking that is affecting your mood.

Besides noticing what you are saying to yourself, it is important to begin to challenge your negative self-talk and beliefs. So, if you are saying something negative to yourself, argue a different point of view that is more positive. Use your counter-arguments to dispute your negative self-talk.

Remember! It may seem artificial to think this way, to slow yourself down, notice what you are saying, and deliberately talk to yourself in a new way. This really is different from ordinary thinking and seems false or strange at first. But, after you do it for a while, you will start to find that your counter-arguments naturally occur to you, and your new style of thinking becomes more automatic and normal. Stick with it and see.



Keeping a Self-Talk Record. Something else you can do to become more aware of your thoughts is to keep a written record. Record all your negative thoughts for one week. Write down the situation in which the thought occurred, what negative thought(s) you had in that situation, and which of the counter-arguments you used to help you dispute those thoughts. Keeping this record for just a week will help you to become much more aware all the time of what you are saying to yourself day to day, and it will help you remember to challenge your thinking.

Date: April 20, 2008

I just finished reading the section on negative self-talk. This made a lot of sense to me. I am still having a hard time talking to anyone about what happened, but at least I'm working on trying to get over this.

Date: April 29, 2008

I talked to Larry about what happened and he seemed to get that this has been hard for me. I got really emotional at one point, so I am not sure he understood everything I said. I'm glad I finally got the courage up to tell him, but it sure was hard. I told myself that I don't need to feel embarrassed about getting emotional sometimes, and that seemed to help me calm down.

Date: April 30, 2008

I had a hard day. Nothing went right. I don't feel like I'm ever going to get over this...

Summary



Everyone has a constant stream of automatic thoughts or "self-talk." Following a trauma, this self-talk can be powerfully affected. Trauma sometimes leads to very negative thinking that, while very understandable and to be expected, can be based on faulty thinking patterns (for example, all-or-nothing thinking). Fortunately, beliefs are not the same as facts, and beliefs often change with time and can be deliberately reviewed and reconsidered. Part of recovery means noticing self-talk and challenging negative or distressing thoughts that can interfere with your recovery. In order to do this, it is important to identify your personal negative beliefs and find ways of challenging or disputing them when they occur. Don't be discouraged if this is hard to do. It takes time and practice. We hope that this book will have started you on the path to rethinking your negative beliefs.